ROU BAO BU CHI ROU
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
10
ERHA HE TA DE BAI MAO SHIZUN

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HUSKY & His
WHITE CAT
SHIZUN
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10

The Husky & His White Cat Shizun

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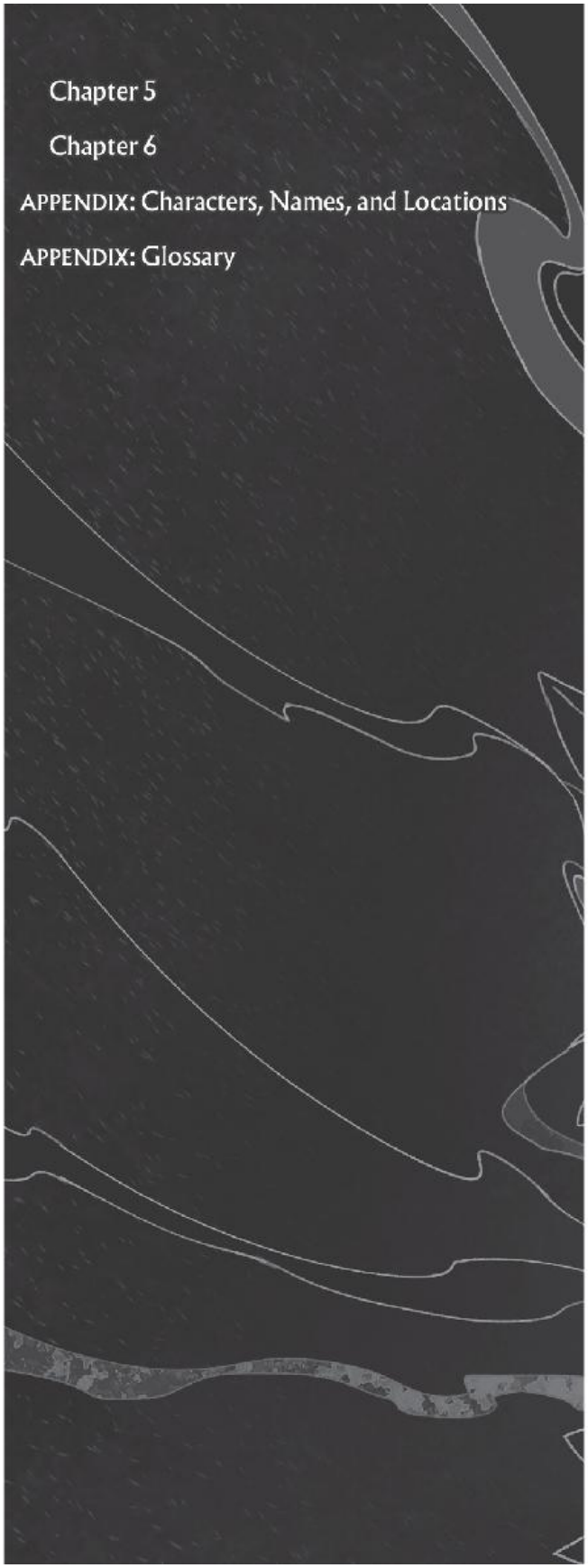


Chapter 295:
The Martyr's Path

BEFORE THEM lay a bridge.

It began at the edge of the cliff and extended endlessly toward the horizon. At the far end, a stone door was set against the firmament. It was impossible to guess its true size; it stood among the clouds, wreathed in scarlet flames that the torrential storm with all its thunder and lightning couldn't douse.

"Shizun, do you remember? You told us this story once yourself. A very long time ago, demons wreaked havoc upon the world. After Gouchen the Exalted helped Fuxi vanquish them, the demon tribe was banished from the mortal realm."

Taxian-jun stared out at the massive stone door hanging in midair, hands behind his back. "Defeated, the Demon Lord and his armies fled. Upon returning to the demon realm, in the humiliation of his defeat, he sealed all doors that linked his world to the world of mortals. From then on, those of the demon race would never set foot in the mortal realm again."

He paused. "But nothing is absolute. As a precaution, the Demon Lord left one passage remaining…the door you see in front of you."

Thunder pealed, lightning crashed.

"The Martyr's Gate."

Chu Wanning wasn't looking at the door. Since the moment they'd arrived on the cliffs, his eyes had been trained on the massive bridge linking the demon realm to the backwoods of Sisheng Peak. He'd first been stricken by the sight, then his face had gone pale. At last, he'd seemed to shatter, his face crumpling with black despair. His head snapped around. "Mo Weiyu, are you *insane*?! This bridge—"

"It's beautiful." Taxian-jun's only reaction to Chu Wanning's outburst was a faint smile. "What's wrong?" he asked, though he knew the answer. "Don't you like it?"

Like it?

Not one piece of wood had been used in the construction of the wide and impossibly long bridge. Not one iron nail. Every inch was made of human bodies: One corpse stacked upon another, reaching into the horizon, all of them crushed into this dead man's bridge that stretched out into the skies. There were the bodies of men and women, young and old, compacted together all the way to that majestic gate. The number of dead was impossible to guess.

"Since this is the Martyr's Gate, of course it requires a Martyr's Path." Taxian-jun was perfectly at ease, as if all these corpses were no more than streetside pebbles or logs chopped from the nearby forest. He whistled, and a beam of dazzling blue light lit up along the bridge's length. Something seemed to be rushing toward them.

"But there are some secrets about the demon realm even Shizun doesn't know." Taxian-jun turned back to Chu Wanning and grinned. "If Shizun doesn't mind, this disciple will enlighten you."

Chu Wanning said nothing.

"Shizun knows that during the battle between Fuxi and the Demon Lord, Gouchen the Exalted turned traitor and forged the first true sword in the world for Fuxi. The Demon Lord held a grudge for this and exacted vengeance on Gouchen the Exalted. Though he couldn't touch the God of a Thousand Weapons, he could punish those of Gouchen's tribe. After the battle, he banished them from the demon realm."

Taxian-jun watched as the spot of blue light grew brighter, his voice low and measured. "The demon race has always possessed potent spiritual energy. But their power cost them in stamina; only the meat and grains of the demon realm could sustain their spiritual cores. After Gouchen the Exalted's tribe was lost in the mortal realm, their cores withered without the sustenance of their homeland. In the end, most became powerless wretches. The only demonic traits they retained were the ease with which they could cultivate and breed."

Taxian-jun paused, turning back to Chu Wanning. "Shizun's realized by now which race Gouchen the Exalted belonged to, right?"

The last thing he wanted to do was play question and answer with Taxian-jun, but what choice did he have? Chu Wanning clenched his jaw. “The Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts.”

“You got it.” Taxian-jun made a show of clapping for him, then smiled. “The Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts—once a formidable power in their own right. To perpetuate their bloodline, their constitutions evolved over time to become the perfect cultivation vessel. When bodies so uniquely suited for dual cultivation also possess powerful spiritual cores, their descendants beget more descendants, and each generation will be stronger than the last. But the doors to the demon realm had closed forever. Cut off from their supply of spiritual energy, their powerful cores withered, leaving only bodies rich with spiritual energy.

“Of course,” said Taxian-jun, eyes dulling as if reminded of someone in particular, “they also possessed the staggering beauty of the demon race.”

Chu Wanning didn’t need him to elaborate on this detail. The cultivation world viewed Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts in one of two ways: flesh to be consumed, or cultivation vessels to be fucked and used. Hadn’t Song Qiutong been auctioned off at the Xuanyuan Pavilion for this exact reason? Even someone as outwardly rational as Jiang Xi didn’t view Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts as human beings, let alone the crowds of cultivators who weren’t bastions of morality in the first place.

“When the strong possess beautiful faces and alluring bodies,” said Taxian-jun, glancing surreptitiously at Chu Wanning, “that’s the perfect finishing touch. But if these traits fall to the weak, those who possess them become as vulnerable as dark feathers on snow or a white fox in the shadows. They are doomed to be violated or slaughtered.”

That blue glow was coming closer, ever closer…

“In the beginning,” Taxian-jun continued, “the Butterfly-Boned clan still had enough demonic power to hold their own among mortals. But gradually their power weakened and disappeared. The result is what we see now. In those days of antiquity, the strong preyed on the weak, and the pure-blooded Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts quickly died out. The survivors hid their identities in order to avoid the same fate.”

“How did they hide?”

"Wow," said Taxian-jun. "That's the first time you've opened your mouth to ask a question of me." His eyes flickered. "It's actually quite simple. You probably remember how Song Qiutong cried golden tears. This is a trait unique to the demon race. To hide your identity, you only need not to cry."

Chu Wanning said nothing. It was simple enough to say, but not at all simple in practice. Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts were impossibly beautiful, conspicuously so. If some cultivator suspected them, there was no shortage of ways to force them to shed tears.

"The undiscovered Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts managed to live on. Some retreated to live in seclusion in the mountains, while others chose to marry mortals. The children of such couplings were sometimes human, sometimes demon. Children can't control their crying. If the demonic blood ran stronger in them, all it took was for them to scrape their knee and shed a few golden tears for disaster to befall both parent and child. Winding up with a human child was nothing to celebrate, either; the demon bloodline remained dormant in them. Who knew when another Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast would pop up somewhere in the family line."

Chu Wanning frowned as a name came to mind. "Song Xingyi…"

"Yes, the Jade-Hearted Lord Song Xingyi from hundreds of years ago." Taxian-jun nodded. "You're right. As the generations wore on, sometimes an extremely lucky child would be born, one who didn't cry golden tears or have the obvious constitution of a cultivation vessel. They appeared just like normal humans, but the potency of their demon bloodline allowed them to form a spiritual core very quickly. Their spiritual energy was no weaker than that of any pure-blooded demon. But such children were impossibly rare. In thousands of years, the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts that rose to the level of zongshi can be counted on one hand." At this, he spread his fine-boned fingers and waggled them before Chu Wanning, half in mockery and half in genuine interest.

After a beat, he continued. "Many Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts yearned to go back to the demon realm. If only they could go home, they'd never have to live through this kind of terror; they'd never have to go all their lives holding back their tears; they'd never fear being sold off as a cultivation vessel or dismembered for consumption. In the years of chaos

when cultivators hunted Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts to increase their own power, they'd never again have to scar their faces for fear their beauty would doom them to death or worse."

He'd spoken so soothingly for so long that the blue light hurtling toward them had resolved into distinct shapes: a team of five horses pounding down the Martyr's Path, pulling a carriage behind them.

"But returning to the demon realm was no easy task," said Taxian-jun. "The Demon Lord despised Gouchen the Exalted. To him, Gouchen was a traitor that'd gone over to the gods; his entire line deserved to be wiped out, eternally blighted. Of course he wouldn't let the pitiable Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts return home."

Chu Wanning said nothing. The storm raged above them, filling the air with the damp stink of petrichor.

Taxian-jun watched the carriage approach. It was a long moment before he continued. "Then the first Demon Lord died, and his successor took the throne. The new ruler was more lenient."

Something shifted in Chu Wanning's eyes. "He allowed the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts to return?"

"Yes," said Taxian-jun, smiling. "But as Shizun can see, he set conditions that cannot be met without the use of the forbidden techniques. If the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts wanted to come home, there were certain things they had to do."

Chu Wanning's heart juddered. He could see the outline of the story taking shape.

Taxian-jun gestured airily at the bridge of corpses before them. "Look at the Martyr's Path. It is the only bridge that links the mortal world to the demon realm, and it requires the willing sacrifice of living humans for its construction." He chuckled. "Finding one person willing to die for another's cause is an enormous stroke of luck; finding five such people would be an unthinkable fortune. A hundred would be a total absurdity. Everyone has their own life to live—who would willingly die to let descendants of demons go home?"

Chu Wanning looked up. "Hence the Zhenlong Chess Formation."

Taxian-jun hadn't expected him to reply. He paused and bared his teeth in a grin. "Indeed."

He looked back over the majestic sprawl of the Martyr's Path and narrowed his eyes. "Over the years, this venerable one has used the Zhenlong Chess Formation to make every last one of them willingly lay down their lives."

"How many did you kill?"

Taxian-jun looked at him, fixing Chu Wanning with those eyes so dark they glinted purple. "Everyone."

Chu Wanning flinched.

"Almost everyone."

The bridge before them seemed to stretch on without an end. Insulated by the sounds of pouring rain, they might have been surrounded by silence or by the screaming, sobbing, shrieking, howling, and begging of the dead. Chu Wanning trembled, but it wasn't from the cold.

"Do you know how long this bridge has to be?" Taxian-jun went on peaceably. "This venerable one slaughtered almost everyone in this world—there might not be more than ten thousand souls left alive. Yet this bridge is only half built. The deaths of the final ten thousand aren't enough to fill the gap."

Silence.

When he spoke at last, Chu Wanning's voice was shaking. "And that's why you had to open the Space-Time Gate?"

"You're always leaping to the worst conclusion," said Taxian-jun. "But you're right. Only by opening the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death and collecting thousands more Zhenlong pawns from another world can this bridge be made complete."

Rain beat down around them, sluicing off the barriers shielding them from the storm. They stared at each other, brown eyes boring into purple-black until a bolt of lightning lit up Chu Wanning's snarl of maddened fury. "You're all insane!"

In the wild light of the storm, all Taxian-jun did was sneer. "This venerable one knew you'd react this way." He turned aside; the carriage had

drawn close enough to make out some details of its build. “Space-Time Gate, Zhenlong Chess.” He paused. “Better still if you have Rebirth. Once all three techniques have been used, the gate to the demon realm will open, and the Butterfly-Boned clan can go home at last.”

Chu Wanning was shaking. Rage and terror had rendered him mute.

Taxian-jun kept his eyes on the carriage and spoke with a rare empathy. “I’m sure you want to know why they had to use these forbidden techniques for the Demon Lord to allow their return. But it’s actually very simple. Gouchen the Exalted created the three forbidden techniques; they represent the once-absolute power of the demon clan. Later, Gouchen saw them as the source of catastrophe and asked Fuxi to proscribe them and tear the records to pieces. It was because of Gouchen that the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts were condemned, so of course they’d have to denounce him and declare themselves his enemy. They had to stand against Gouchen the Exalted and violate Fuxi’s heavenly authority to win the demon realm’s forgiveness.”

With a long whinny, the demon horses at the head of the carriage broke through the flames of the Martyr’s Path and into the baleful rains of the mortal world. They stood poised and proud at the end of the bridge.

Taxian-jun’s black robes fluttered in the wind. He stroked the bare skull of one dark steed and turned back to Chu Wanning. “Use the forbidden techniques, defy Gouchen the Exalted, and make an enemy of Fuxi—all to regain their place as the rightful descendants of demons. Shizun, now do you understand? Everything Hua Binan has done was for the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts.”

Chapter 296:
Like That Bygone Dream

UNDERSTAND?

What was there to understand? Shi Mingjing had hidden his identity from Sisheng Peak from the start. All those years, he'd avoided the subject of his parents; whenever it was brought up, he'd say a scant few words before looking so grieved no one had the heart to press him further. A lie always had its flaws; false stories told at length revealed their holes. Shi Mei wasn't ignorant of such basic truths. In hindsight, even when he was still a boy, Shi Mei never cried, no matter what kind of injury or turmoil he endured.

"Come. This venerable one will bring you to look at the other end of the Martyr's Path."

The carriage was of demonic origin, cast of pure gold and emblazoned with scenes of the demon territories inlaid in silver. Two figures occupied the front of the carriage. On the left was a bearded man, his face twisted in a mask of fury and a set square clutched in his hands. The sculptor must've borne him some terrible grudge, for the statue's face was so ugly and misshapen anyone who clapped eyes on it would despise him on sight. On the right was a pudgy woman, her face set in stern lines and her hands gripping a compass. Her, the artist had spared—though she, too, was ugly, she was at least bearably so.

The most unsettling element hovered before the team of horses: a set of dismembered limbs and a bloody severed head, held suspended with spiritual energy. Upon closer inspection, they were only wooden carvings, not real body parts, but Chu Wanning had seen the fake Gouchen at Jincheng Lake and recognized his likeness immediately.

"All the carriages in the demon realm are like this." Taxian-jun glanced at the vividly carved head. "It's been this way for thousands of years."

They took their seats inside, the little bells on the horses' bridles chiming as the carriage swayed. Taxian-jun sprawled out comfortably. "You can tell who those statues are meant to be, right?"

"Fuxi and Nüwa."

"Yes." He laughed. "The ol' Demon Lord hates the heavenly realm so much he'd make the gods pull his carriage for a lifetime if he could."

"But Shennong was spared?"

"That I don't know; Hua Binan never mentioned it. But the legends say Shennong was kind and magnanimous; he never involved himself in any violence, nor was he particularly close to Fuxi and Nüwa. The sly old fox probably kept his hands clean of the whole thing."

Silent, Chu Wanning turned toward the window, looking out at the crimson path before them.

The demon horses ran swiftly. In just a few minutes, they'd made it to the end of that bloody bridge. They exited the carriage, white bone bridge beneath their feet and an endless sea of clouds before their faces. The gate to the demon realm was hundreds of times larger than it looked from Sisheng Peak. This close, its full size and details were inescapable: It was impossibly huge, seeming to reach up through the skies and down through the earth, hissing and crackling with demonic flame in the rain. Next to it, a mortal seemed as insignificant as an ant on the trunk of a great tree, a single grain in the vastness of the ocean.

Chu Wanning stared at that set of titanic doors. Every inch of its surface was covered in intricately detailed carvings depicting scenes of the five realms, beginning with the demon realm at the top, descending through the ghost realm, fae realm, and mortal realm, and ending with the heavenly realm at the door's foot. The engravings were majestic, but they radiated an indescribable evil.

"Does it feel very strange?" Taxian-jun came to his side and gazed at the doors with him. "The first time this venerable one saw it, this venerable one couldn't figure it out either."

Chu Wanning didn't respond.

“It took the better part of an hour before this venerable one realized what was wrong.” But it was clear he wasn’t going to waste another hour letting Chu Wanning stare at it as well. “The carvings aren’t made of the same stone as the door. They were embedded later,” he said. “They’re all made of the bones of gods.”

Chu Wanning whirled to look at him.

Bathed in the light of the demonic flame, Taxian-jun looked even more volatile. “In that primordial battle between the gods and demons, the Demon Lord ordered all the captured gods flayed and dismembered. Their bones were engraved and set in the doors leading to the demon realm.”

A gust of wind snapped through his robes. “From then on, any living thing entering the demon realm would see how many heavenly gods its inhabitants had slain. It’s a declaration that the demon race behind those doors will never share the same skies as the gods again.”

He looked at that disquieting sight a beat longer. “It’s about time,” said Taxian-jun. “Now that you understand what we’re doing, are you still going to waste your breath on reproach?”

“Slaughtering everyone in two worlds just to pave the way home.” Chu Wanning looked up. Though he knew Taxian-jun was a puppet on strings, he couldn’t help sneering. “If not reproach, were you expecting praise?”

Before Taxian-jun could answer, the shuffle of footsteps rose behind them. They looked back to see Mu Yanli leading a massive throng out of the back mountains of Sisheng Peak. She clearly hadn’t expected to find them here; she blinked in surprise, eyes flicking to Taxian-jun’s companion.

“How could you bring him here?” Her eyes never left Chu Wanning as she questioned Taxian-jun. “Think before you act.”

“This venerable one can guess what he’ll do just by looking at him,” said Taxian-jun coolly. “You needn’t worry.”

“This place is key to the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts’ return. Don’t you know—”

Taxian-jun had no interest in wasting his breath. “Is there anyone in that horde of garbage you keep around capable of matching him in a fight?”

Mu Yanli shut her mouth.

“Having him by this venerable one’s side is more secure than locking him in a cage sealed with ten different wards. This venerable one’s doing you a favor keeping an eye on him—how have you still got so much shit to spew?”

“You—!”

“What?” Taxian-jun peered idly at her, his gaze frigid. “If that’s not good enough, this venerable one will put him right back and wash my hands of the whole thing. *You* figure out how to keep him contained—but make sure you don’t slip up and let him kill Hua Binan.”

Mu Yanli regarded him in stony silence, then changed the subject, seething. “Very well. I’ve brought some pawns; put them in. A-Nan captured more people from the other world; they’re imprisoned at Sisheng Peak. After you deal with these, hurry back and make more pawns.”

She left with a sweep of her sleeves. Taxian-jun glanced at Chu Wanning and smiled, his cheeks dimpling deeply. “A new shipment of materials? It’s your lucky day. Would you like to see how this venerable one builds the bridge?”

Sacrificing living people to a floating bridge was a horror beyond imagining. That night, Chu Wanning had a terrible dream. Taxian-jun stood at the end of the bridge atop a pile of shattered corpses. From hearts to livers to stomachs to spleens, each human organ and every scrap of mangled flesh had grown a crimson mouth with which to scream.

“I don’t want to die…”

“Give me back my life… Give me back my life…”

In that heap of mutilated corpses, he saw a part of Xue Meng’s face, saw Xue Zhengyong’s eyes and Madam Wang’s body. He saw Huaizui’s hand, spotted with age. He threw himself at them, screaming, “Xue Meng! Sect Leader! Mada—”

His voice died in his throat.

Amidst that sea of scarlet, Mo Ran slowly turned. He wore his old disciple’s uniform, and his eyes were soft and sad. “Shizun,” he said. “Help me… I don’t want to die, I don’t want to be like this. Save me…”

Chu Wanning jolted awake with a gasp. His back was soaked in sweat; he wanted to sit up, but his wrists were bound with Taxian-jun’s spells. He couldn’t move.

The room was silent but for his ragged breathing. The water clock dripped, water trickling from its spout like the tears of the dead.

“Is anyone there…?”

He was skin and bones after all he’d been through, slender and frail. He lay on the bed, so slight he almost disappeared beneath the blankets.

The memories of the past and his mistakes of the present; those piles of the dead and the hopelessness of his future: Each and every one hung as a weight upon his shoulders, heavy enough to grind even the steeliest resolve to ash. Chu Wanning’s eyes were vacant and dull. He stared mutely

into the darkness as the dream slipped away, but reality wasn't much better than his nightmare. Upon waking, he looked only more harrowed.

"Is anyone there?" he called again.

Liu-gong came hobbling in, much older than Chu Wanning remembered him. After all, it'd been years since he'd died in this world.

The old servant could read him like a book. "Zongshi, did you have a bad dream?"

Chu Wanning nodded sluggishly.

"I'll go warm a pot of ginger tea for you."

"That won't be necessary." Chu Wanning looked up at him, his eyes wet and glassy in the dim. "Where is Mo Ran? Is he still on the Martyr's Path?"

Silence answered him.

"How many more people did he kill?"

Old Liu said nothing for a long time. "Zongshi." He sighed. "Don't ask any more questions."

The water clock plinked in the corner. Wind and rain rustled outside.

"This old servant doesn't know much about cultivation, but ever since the Space-Time Gate was fully opened, I knew there was no way back. I'm sure Zongshi understands this too."

Chu Wanning's lips parted. He screwed his eyes shut, hooking his fingers around the scarlet chain of spiritual energy binding his wrists. Taxian-jun had been wary of him since he'd failed his assassination attempt. When idle, Taxian-jun watched over him personally; when called to build the path home for the demon clan, he locked Chu Wanning in Wushan Palace.

"Zongshi…you've done enough. It's been two lifetimes. You've done all you can." Liu-gong's voice was thin and reedy, like an autumn leaf clinging to a branch. "These are the last days we have. Just let it go like the rest of us have done. Everything's coming to an end. There's nothing to be done. Why not enjoy the time you have left? Don't torment yourself."

Despite Chu Wanning's protests, Liu-gong brought him a bowl of ginger tea and watched him drink. In the past life, the old man had been careful; he knew when to speak up and when to keep his silence, which was why he'd lasted so long at Taxian-jun's side. But on this miserable, rainy night, as he looked at Chu Wanning—driven past the point of endurance and worn thin by despair—his eyes came to rest on his face, paler than even the ceramic bowl in his hands, and his feelings grew complicated.

Liu-gong didn't know how to persuade him. "Have some more," he mumbled. "At least finish the bowl… Ginger tea drives out the cold, and everyone says nightmares are caused by the chill. If you drink it before bed, you won't have bad dreams." His voice dropped to a murmur. "My son used to have nightmares all the time. Whenever I brought him ginger tea, he slept soundly…"

But those words were too quiet for Chu Wanning to hear.

The old servant helped him finish the tea and left with the tray in hand. When he stepped out of the room, he wiped at his eyes. The old man had a soft heart, but he couldn't change anything. The realization bent his stooped back lower as he disappeared down the end of that long hallway.

Old Liu was right. The time to stop Shi Mei had been before the Space-Time Gate opened in the first place. They'd missed their chance, and the consequences were irreversible.

Chu Wanning sat alone in Wushan Palace. He'd lost to Shi Mei. In the past life, he'd discovered the truth too late—all his planning, all his sacrifice, had only delayed this catastrophe by a dozen years. In the end, they'd come back to the beginning. He'd done everything he could, yet it had all come to nothing.

Nearly all the ancient texts reported that tearing apart time and space would call down heavenly retribution. Yet even without this punishment, the two worlds had been destroyed past repair. These were the end times; everyone could feel it. But with only his cognizance soul, Taxian-jun felt no unease. In fact he was quite content with his lot.

That day, he returned with a jug of pear-blossom white and poured two cups. "The Martyr's Path is pretty much complete."

Chu Wanning answered him with silence.

"Once Hua Binan's accomplished his goal, things will settle down." He took a sip of his long-missed pear-blossom white and grinned. "Mm, tastes just the same." He raised his eyes. "Once they've all gone back to the demon realm, do you want to live in this world with this venerable one, or should this venerable one go through the Space-Time Gate and keep you company in the other one?"

"Where's Shi Mei?"

"Shi…" Taxian-jun blinked, and those dark brows drew together, confusion and pain scrawled over his face. He set down his cup and kneaded at his temples.

Chu Wanning watched his every move. Hua Binan really had made a ruin of his mind. To Taxian-jun, the concept of "Shi Mei" was like a blank void. He physically couldn't think beyond it. Even trying gave him a splitting headache. He hurled his cup aside, and in the flickering candlelight, stared in red-eyed exhaustion at the man before him. "I don't know." He closed his eyes and pulled Chu Wanning into standing in front of him. Still seated, he buried his face in Chu Wanning's stomach and breathed deeply of his haitang scent. "Don't ask me again."

Taxian-jun was just as possessive of Chu Wanning as he had been in the first life—perhaps even worse. This corpse that should have had no emotions at all seemed terrified Chu Wanning would disappear again, or die. He used the strongest spells and techniques at his disposal to keep him trapped. In the daytime, Taxian-jun left to make Zhenlong pawns to pave the Martyr's Path. At night, he entwined his limbs with Chu Wanning's again and again—as if only the wildest lovemaking could soothe the anxiety in his heart, as if he could only convince himself he wasn't dreaming by burying himself in the warmth of Chu Wanning's body.

"Wanning…"

In the dead of night, the man asleep beside him mumbled, "Pay attention to me…"

At such times, Chu Wanning felt the corpse wrapped around him had a soul, though he knew it to be impossible. The heart in his chest beat strong and steady, and his face was that of the dead young man Chu

Wanning had lost. When he hoarsely said the name “Wanning,” something like love was audible in Taxian-jun’s voice.

Chapter 297:
Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts

ON THE SIXTH DAY, the doors of Wushan Palace opened with a creak.

The storm continued to rage outside. The figure in the doorway set aside his dripping umbrella, yanking aside his soaking robes and striding into the hall. “Shizun.”

His clothes were the pale cream of lotus root, and he wore a headband across his brow. Those gently slanted peach-blossom eyes, usually so beautifully expressive, were smudged with shadow.

It was the first time Shi Mei had come to Wushan Palace to see him since the battle at the Heaven-Piercing Tower. “I wanted to visit Shizun earlier, but I couldn’t step away until now. Please forgive my tardiness.”

Chu Wanning spared him only a glance before turning aside.

Shi Mei didn’t seem to mind; he settled down in front of Chu Wanning, looking quite pleased with himself. Perhaps construction of the bridge was proceeding more smoothly than anticipated, or he’d received some other good news—his eyes were sparkling and bright. “Are you still mad at me? The door to the demon realm is soon to open. Shizun, don’t you have any questions for me?”

Chu Wanning kept his silence, staring out the window at the rain. His helplessness and vulnerability were things only visible to the man he loved; Shi Mingjing had bled away all the warmth he’d had for him, reducing Chu Wanning to unfeeling stone. No words of his would melt him anymore.

Shi Mei sighed. “I meant to have a good talk with you today. Say something, at the very least.”

Chu Wanning finally deigned to give him a response. “Get out.”

Now that success was close at hand, Shi Mei was more at ease than the last time they’d spoken. Chu Wanning’s coolness didn’t enrage him. Instead he smiled. “Look, you did say something.”

Rain drummed against the windows. The Space-Time Gate had thrown both worlds into chaos; this unending rain was the least of the unusual phenomena that had occurred. Chu Wanning thought the storm might never end—that the rain would pour from the sky until it drowned both worlds.

Shi Mei didn't mind his silence. He rose and poured two cups of tea, only continuing once he'd slid one next to Chu Wanning's hand. "If you're going to ignore me, I'll go ahead and talk at you. I don't like explaining myself, but I don't want there to be misunderstandings between Shizun and me."

The tea was still hot. He blew at the tea leaves on the surface and took a measured sip. "Where should I start? Since I was a child, I've done many awful deeds and told lies upon lies—but I never wanted to take innocent lives."

Chu Wanning's hands clenched against his will, tendons protruding from bloodless skin.

"Shizun's seen the Martyr's Path, right? At the start, I only wanted to fill it with people worse than beasts. Their deaths would be no loss. Later, when I realized the distance it needed to span—so great it required the bodies from two universes to reach the other side," Shi Mei said, "my heart ached too."

A pause. "I don't like having blood on my hands, so I've hardly killed anyone. I didn't lie to you."

"That's true," said Chu Wanning suddenly. "I believe that you've hardly ever killed with your own hands."

Shi Mei raised an eyebrow, bemused.

Chu Wanning turned to him with eyes colder than ice. "You're soft-hearted and benevolent. You don't want to take innocent lives, you don't like having blood on your hands. You wouldn't do any of that yourself, and that's why you created a Taxian-jun—so he'd be the one to slaughter Rufeng Sect, so he'd be the one befouled. He did everything you needed to do but didn't want to. How clever."

"Now that's unfair of you, Shizun." Shi Mei sighed. "I never wanted to slaughter Rufeng Sect. That was his own personal grudge."

"Without the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows, he would never have committed such a grave sin."

"Are you so sure of that?"

Chu Wanning held Shi Mei's gaze. "I am."

Shi Mei smiled and waved a hand, dismissing the topic. "Sure. Not worth fighting over. I once told Xu Shuanglin I hoped for a world where the competent had power and the useless were powerless, where good and evil both received their just rewards. That was the truth. I didn't lie. But for the Butterfly-Boned clan, kindness to others comes at the cost of our own lives. Our way home *must* be paved in blood. I had no other choice."

Chu Wanning closed his eyes.

Shi Mei refilled his cup. "Shizun can't understand why I would sacrifice the living of two worlds to bring the Butterfly-Boned clan back to the demon realm," he said with a sigh. "It's really quite simple."

He stared at the spirals of steam rising from his cup. The room was silent but for the ebb and flow of Shi Mei's gentle voice. "Shizun, have you ever seen a herd of hunted bison? Maddened and desperate, charging every which way, ready to gore anyone standing in front of them, be they human or beast. It's their basic instinct to survive."

Chu Wanning knew what he meant. The Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts were like animals driven to the edge of a cliff, surrounded by ravenous mouths ready to tear them apart.

"The Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts have only two options: Return to the demon realm or die out entirely. A choice between life and death." Shi Mei's eyes darkened. "If the cultivation world didn't see Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts as livestock, to be sold and abused at will—if we had seen a future for our people in the mortal realm, nobody would wish to carry out such atrocities."

Shi Mei fell silent, emotions churning in his eyes. As Chu Wanning watched, they went from dark to distressed to apathetic before taking on a crazed glint, as if mirroring the course of his own life.

"The hunted bison never wanted to kill. But when the butchers bring down their knives—when the people around you start to die, one after

another… Shizun, how do you expect us to forgive a world like this?" Shi Mei's voice shook. "The cultivation realm has never kept a historical record of the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts; they see us as meat, or as cultivation vessels. But we've kept our own records. By the eleventh year after the next great battle between mortals and demons, nearly all pure-blooded Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts had been murdered. In the thousands of years that followed, we never escaped cultivators' greed no matter how carefully we hid.

"Four thousand years ago, two thousand five hundred years ago, nine hundred years ago, seven hundred years ago. Again and again, the hunters came for us. Those carrying the Butterfly-Boned bloodline were chased down and consumed, imprisoned and brutalized… They stopped at nothing to wipe us out."

Shi Mei's fingers tightened around his cup, the strain visible in the tendons of his wrist. "If we'd died out, that would've been the end of it, at least. But how could they give up such a promising cultivation method?"

He paused. "Shizun is very well-read. I'm sure you know to what lengths the previous sect leader of Guyueye went to keep Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts from dying out completely." Shi Mei looked up at him, his peach-blossom eyes stained crimson.

Chu Wanning did. Any history of Guyueye made mention of the fact, lauding it as some kind of marvelous achievement—

The medicinal sect Guyueye had captured twenty young women carrying the blood of the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts and invited strong and virile male cultivators to breed them day and night until they were with child. The sect leader plied them with drugs that shortened gestation to four months. After the babes were born, those women, still weak from birth, would be defiled again, forced to carry another child and forced into unnatural labor, over and over, to continue the Butterfly-Boned line.

This propagation was like breeding livestock for the slaughterhouse. No, not like—they *were* livestock. The male infants were dismembered to make pills or sold to rich clients like Rufeng Sect. The female infants were kept and reared in captivity until they became fertile and could be seeded to start the next batch.

Seeded. Chu Wanning still remembered the shock and disgust he'd felt the first time he'd seen the word in a copy of *Handbook on the Pills and Potions of Guyueye*.

Shi Mei smiled again. For the first time, that smile looked drawn and pallid. "They reared Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts the way one would venomous snakes and won the cultivation realm's praise for it. But they were human beings…all human beings. Just because they had some ancient demon blood in their veins—enough to be useful for cultivation—everyone deemed them animals."

Shi Mei took a sip of tea to hide his own agony, but his fingers were trembling. "The drugs used to induce labor left the mothers very weak. None of the captive Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts lived past the age of thirty, but for them, that was a blessing: a quicker end to that nightmarish cycle of endless breeding and birthing."

Spots of hateful color appeared on Shi Mei's cheeks when he said the words *breeding and birthing*, as if someone had slapped him. He fell silent. For a moment, it seemed he'd lose control and start cursing, but he only pursed his mouth around a few bitter syllables. "A mercy."

Chu Wanning finally opened his eyes and looked at Shi Mei. With hatred so vividly etched on his face, this man who'd always been serene and enigmatic resembled any other person driven by revenge.

Shi Mei lapsed into silence. Whatever he was thinking, it seemed to push him over the edge—he put down the cup and buried his face in his hands. He scrubbed at it, then took a deep breath. When he looked up again, his eyes were rimmed in red. Chu Wanning couldn't remember ever seeing Shi Mei so emotional before. "Does Shizun remember why Guyueye stopped breeding Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts?"

Chu Wanning didn't know how he felt. "There was a bloodbath," he rasped.

Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts weren't animals, no matter how they were treated. Even gu worms would bite back, much less living, breathing humans. During Jiang Xi's shifu's term as sect leader, one captive Butterfly-Boned girl refused to submit.

Unlike her sisters, she was neither hollowly suicidal nor numbly unresisting, but possessed a calculating mind. Using sweet words and wiles, she seduced a high-ranking disciple of Tianyin Pavilion who'd come to Guyueye to peruse their wares. The disciple was a lascivious man, and he visited the beautiful girl's bed that very night. The next day, she begged her new lover to buy her from Guyueye. She swore to be his for a lifetime and aid in his cultivation however she could.

Blinded by lust, the disciple did as she asked—only for her to run away a few days later. She somehow found the spark for apocalyptic fire and snuck back to Rainbell Isle under cover of darkness. The girl set the entire side courtyard where she'd been imprisoned alight. She helped the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts escape and left nearly a hundred Guyueye disciples to perish in the flames.

The other sects looked on with indifference, offering public words of consolation while privately mocking Guyueye for failing to manage a mere girl. The medicinal sect was deeply humiliated. Furious, the sect leader ended the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast breeding program. "If it's so amusing to you," he'd declared, "don't come asking for medicines in the future. After all, so many of them escaped—if you have the skill, hunt them yourself."

By the time Jiang Xi took up the position of sect leader, Song Qiutong was the only Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast who remained in Guyueye's possession. She was meant to serve the sect leader, but Jiang Xi disdained carnal matters, disliked women, and saw Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts as a source of disaster. He persisted in auctioning her off against the wishes of the sect elders.

Shi Mei knew Chu Wanning remembered all this. He smiled. "Let me tell you something you don't know."

"Go on."

"That day at Xuanyuan Pavilion—yes, the day Miss Song was auctioned. I was there as well."

Chu Wanning blinked.

"I was there, in the Xuan booth. I bid thirty-five million."

That did ring a bell. Mo Ran had been there with him. He'd taken pity on Song Qiutong and wanted to save her, but the guest in the veiled chamber above him had bid thirty-five million right from the start. He'd even tried asking Mo Ran for money to bid against them…

"That was you?"

"It was." Shi Mei's composure slowly returned. "I swore an oath, long ago, to protect any Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast I could. Song Qiutong was my kin. Once I heard the news, I tried to save her. Of course, I also hoped to use Bugui to trigger the fiendish energy in Mo Ran in that life. Who would've thought the half of your earth soul in him would work so perfectly as a shield—it even resonated with you instead… But enough. It's all in the past now. Shizun knows, regardless, that it was Ye Wangxi who bought her."

"She was your kin. Back at Rufeng Sect—why did you…"

"Why did I look on as she died?" Shi Mei smiled. "I had no choice. I had to keep my identity secret. To tell you the truth, I was the one who commanded Mount Huang to open—she was only a pretense. If things had gone differently, perhaps I could have saved her, but in front of Xu Shuanglin… Shizun knows my spiritual energy is weak. Xu Shuanglin was my source of strength at the time. He saw me as his confidant, but I'd befriended him under the guise of Shi Mingjing of Sisheng Peak."

Chu Wanning watched him quietly.

"If he knew I was a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast, would he still work with me?" Shi Mei asked evenly. "I said earlier that most cultivators see us as livestock, and Xu Shuanglin was no exception. I could tell from the way he treated Miss Song."

All these revelations weighed on Chu Wanning; he didn't know what to say. But Shi Mei was still in the mood to talk. "But that is neither here nor there. The one I wish to tell you about is the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast who escaped Guyueye."

Chu Wanning looked down in silence. After a moment, he raised his eyes to Shi Mei's peerlessly beautiful face. He'd already put the pieces together during his earlier tale. "That woman." It was almost a sigh. "She was your mother, wasn't she?"

Shi Mei blinked. The tension bled out of his back, the tight lines of his jaw unclenching. He laughed, a hollow sound. “You always figure it out. Yes. She was my mother.”

Chapter 298:
As Fate Would Have It

RAIN HISSED DOWN on the roof. Shi Mei took a sip of tea. When he spoke again, it was decisive, as if he'd made up his mind. "Let me show you something."

He produced a stained copper mirror from his qiankun pouch. Its frame was patterned with flying dragons and soaring phoenixes winging their way through the sun, moon, and stars. "This is the Yestertide Mirror. It belonged to my father, surnamed Mu… I imagine Shizun's already guessed it. Mu Yanli and I are half-siblings."

Shi Mei bit his fingertip and let a drop of blood fall onto the mirror's surface. The copper fogged over; when it cleared, a hazy illusion had appeared inside. Slowly, the picture took shape, and the details sharpened…

They looked down upon the lookout platform at Tianyin Pavilion. It was a hot summer day, and the lotus pond beneath the pavilion was in splendid bloom. Red dragonflies dipped low. A sumptuously dressed woman stood by the railing, scattering scraps of pastry from a small dish. Fish leapt from the water to catch the crumbs falling from her red-painted fingers.

Though she was beautiful, her features were severe. She lifted her head to speak to her servants, revealing upswept phoenix eyes—slightly sultry, and sharp in a way that spoke to her confidence in her looks.

Chu Wanning frowned slightly. He looked at her, then again at Shi Mei.

Guessing the source of Chu Wanning's confusion, Shi Mei smiled. "She's not my mother. That's Mu-jiejie's mother, Lady Lin."

As they watched, a pretty girl in an embroidered dress, her hair done up in the style of Tianyin Pavilion's servants, walked onto the scene. She looked to be no more than eighteen, her face soft with youth and her manner gentle.

Shi Mei ran his fingers over the mirror. "This is my mother… A descendant of the Jade-Hearted Lord, Song Xingyi. Guyueye reared her like an animal; they didn't give her a name. She wanted to choose her own after she escaped, but Song is one of the Butterfly-Boned clan's noble surnames. She dared not use it for herself, so she took the word *hua* from Jade-Hearted Lord's title—*Hua Bi Zhi Zun*—and chose a homophone. From then on, she went by Hua Gui. *Hua* to mark her heritage, and *Gui* as in *return home*. Once my mother learned the Butterfly-Boned clan still had a chance to return to the demon realm, it became her dearest wish."

The tarnish on the mirror failed to hide Hua Gui's stunning beauty. She was speaking deferentially to Lady Lin. Though all the other maidservants seemed to be on tenterhooks before their chilly mistress, Hua Gui smiled and approached her warmly.

Chu Wanning looked up. "How did she end up at Tianyin Pavilion?"

"The disciple who bought her originally. One part of the story isn't true—my mother didn't leave him after she escaped Guyueye. They were deeply in love, and my mother begged him to figure out how to save her clan members. At the time, the disciple hung on her every word—*he* stole apocalyptic fire from Tianyin Pavilion and helped her accomplish her goal."

A crease remained between Chu Wanning's brows. So that was what happened. Not all historical records were correct. Some truths were slowly worn away by the deluge of time; when all the witnesses grew old and died, no one would know the whole story anymore.

Shi Mei paused for a beat. "As two years passed, the cultivation realm gradually forgot all about the Guyueye fire. Around the same time, Lady Lin of Tianyin Pavilion happened to give birth to a daughter. The lady had a strange temperament and no enthusiasm for childrearing, so she needed a few nimble maidservants to help. The disciple who loved my mother took the opportunity to bring her into the pavilion, where she became Lady Lin's handmaiden."

Chu Wanning looked back down at the copper mirror. At some point, the scene within had changed to that of Lady Lin reading by a window while Hua Gui stood by her side cradling and cooing at a swaddled child. It was a gentle scene. The mistress was poised and elegant, her maidservant

devoted and loyal, the babe sweet and silly. Yet he sensed dark things lurking under the surface. “She took Lady Lin’s place.”

“Mn,” said Shi Mei. “After spending some time in Tianyin Pavilion, my mother noticed how high Tianyin Pavilion’s status in the cultivation realm was, above all other sects. Back then, she was still naïve. She came up with a plan she thought was better than returning to the demon realm.”

“What was it?”

“Become the pavilion master’s wife. The word of a descendant of the gods was law. She imagined that, if the pavilion master ordered it, no one in the cultivation realm would dare harm Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts, at least openly.”

Light and shadow whirled and spun in the mirror. The scene settled on the same lookout platform, but now it was the winter of some unknown year. The lotus flowers had withered and died; there were no more dragonflies, and the red carp remained submerged in their watery home. Both the lively creatures and the coolly beautiful Lady Lin were gone, replaced by falling snow, the fragrance of wintertime plum blossoms, and a woman bundled in white fox-fur, seen from behind.

A man approached, and she turned to him, her beautiful face nestled in the soft fur. When she smiled, it was a sight more striking than the new-fallen snow.

Hua Gui had somehow managed to convince the pavilion master to divorce his wife. Mysteriously, Lady Lin had died soon after, alongside the high-ranking disciple who’d once helped Hua Gui escape Guyueye. She’d finally achieved her goal of becoming the wife of Tianyin Pavilion’s master, a descendant of the gods.

The sky was a leaden gray, dappled with huge flakes of falling snow. Hua Gui stepped toward her husband and bowed in greeting, then reached out with a smile to stroke the hair of the little girl beside him.

“Mu Yanli?”

“Yes,” said Shi Mei.

Chu Wanning fell silent.

“Is Shizun wondering why, despite being Lady Lin’s blood daughter, Mu-jiejie would choose my mother over her own?”

Instead of replying, Chu Wanning peered into the mirror. Mu Yanli couldn’t have been older than five. Hua Gui had scooped the child up, and when her new stepmother teased her, the girl wrapped her arms around Hua Gui’s slender neck and laughed to her heart’s content.

“Lady Lin was sullen and taciturn, hardly a loving mother. After Mu-jiejie was born, Lady Lin became unbalanced and began to hurt herself and others. Once when my mother wasn’t in the room, she jabbed the back of Mu-jiejie’s hand with a pair of scissors. She left a handful of bloody holes in her child’s skin before my mother returned and stepped in to save the sobbing Mu-jiejie. Between a mother who would stab her to death and a nanny who’d doted on her since she was born, Mu-jiejie picked the latter.”

The scene changed. Frost lay thick on a window plastered with auspicious red paper cutouts. It must’ve been shortly after the new year. Hua Gui sat before a sandalwood table, writing. Two children clustered beside her, a girl and a boy. The girl was cool and distant, but the boy had gentle features and a soft disposition. These were the young Hua Binan and Mu Yanli.

“All done.” Hua Gui picked up the page and blew on the ink to dry it, her voice sweet. “Look, your mother’s copied the medicinal sect’s pill formula—isn’t it nice-looking?”

Mu Yanli still had the piping voice of a child. “Everything Mother writes is pretty,” she chirped.

Shi Mei was so young he couldn’t even babble. He sucked on his thumb, watching them tease and joke with each other.

“My dad was devoted to cultivation; he didn’t spend much time disciplining us. She was the one who looked after both Mu-jiejie and me.” Staring at the mirror, Shi Mei sank into memory. “She taught us to read and to use some of the simplest spells.”

“She knew spells?”

“Only a few.” Shi Mei paused. “Little tricks used to spook commoners. She was probably no match for even the sloppiest cultivator.”

Chu Wanning waited for him to continue.

"But she was our constant company, day in and day out." Shi Mei sighed, his eyes glued to the mirror. "No matter how calculating she was, no matter how she treated outsiders—she loved us more than anything."

The scenes spun faster, light and shadow slipping by like a shuttle between a weaver's fingers, like water spilling from cupped hands. Within those flickering images, Mu Yanli and Shi Mei slowly grew up. Hua Gui sheltered them every step of the way. On stormy nights, she lay with Mu Yanli until she fell asleep. On hot summer afternoons, she spoon-fed Shi Mei cooling red bean soup. The mirror filled up with the minutiae of their lives.

"When I came of age, I learned cultivation. Father personally taught me Tianyin Pavilion's techniques, but I lacked talent and was slow to grasp them. He was bitterly disappointed. I, too, thought I was a useless failure—after all, Mu-jiejie had established her foundation at the age of eight, but after all my work, I still couldn't even sense qi."

Within the mirror, a small Shi Mei sat blankly by the pond with an even smaller sword on his knees. Hua Gui appeared, her heavy skirts clutched in her hand and a deep frown between her brows. She strode over the floating wooden bridge, her eyes scanning the edges of the pond until she caught sight of Shi Mei's lonely figure. Relief lit her face. She made her way to the boy and bent to say something they couldn't hear. After a time, she took Shi Mei into her arms and turned back, carrying him into the garden and away.

"She'd been raised at Guyueye and seen many spiritually weak people carve a niche for themselves in the cultivation realm through the medicinal arts. Although Guyueye had once abused Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts, she didn't scorn these arts; she convinced my father to let me cultivate the path of medicine."

When Shi Mei had told the tale of those lurid affairs, Chu Wanning had gleaned some idea of Hua Gui's competence—though *how* skilled she was, he couldn't say. Now, he vividly felt the sharpness of this woman's fangs. To her, Guyueye would've been like a nightmare out of hell, one that'd devoured most of her life. Anyone else would've had reservations about the medicinal sect, if not the deepest hatred for it, and refused to come near it again. But Hua Gui possessed cold and penetrating eyes. She knew exactly what the sect was, what she needed, and how to get it. She never let the depth of her loathing impair her decisions.

"All her plans were meticulously thought out. Every step she took had been worked out to the hundredth step after. Even while raising Mu-jiejie and myself, she continued to seek out other members of our tribe and go to impossible lengths to help them live in safety."

Yet despite her grand plans, the status of Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts had gone unchanged, and Madam Hua had passed away long ago. What had happened? Chu Wanning recalled the rumors about Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts and the descendants of the gods, and thought he had some idea. "Madam Hua's identity…came to light?"

Shi Mei didn't answer him immediately. A sharp glint flashed through his eyes; at first glance, the sentiment might've been bone-deep hatred, but on further inspection, it was a grief deeper than the sea. "It shouldn't have. Father wasn't very bright, he never noticed anything amiss about her… But he remained a descendant of the gods. Even if the blood was thin in him, he had some special intuition."

He looked down at the mirror. The vision that had taken shape showed the bedroom of Tianyin Pavilion's master, where a man with white-streaked hair lay in his sickbed.

"The year I turned nine, he fell gravely ill. It was a baffling sickness; even the best doctors couldn't figure out what was killing him." Shi Mei scoffed. "But it was quite obvious if you understood what was going on. My father was a son of the gods, and my mother was the daughter of demons. After the great battle between the two tribes, the Demon Lord cursed them—forever after, there could be no union between gods and demons. All transgressors would die.

"Father didn't know his sickness was the work of that ancient curse. As for what happened next, perhaps the divine realm acted out of pity for their descendant or simply out of vindictiveness against the Demon Lord. Regardless, one night, a deity appeared to my father in a dream and revealed everything. If he wanted to survive, the deity said, he had to cut all ties with the demoness."

Chu Wanning studied Shi Mei's twisted face in silence. He knew whatever happened next hadn't been as simple as a cutting of ties.

"Father woke in a blinding rage. Tianyin Pavilion had always acted with impunity, and his status in the cultivation realm was unparalleled.

Everyone revered him as if he was really a god, but this woman…this vessel for dual cultivation, this pile of moldering meat anyone could butcher at will, had dared to plot against him, to use him, and to lie to him. She'd even nearly killed him. She was a malicious, poisonous creature. That's why—"

He sucked in a deep breath. Despite the pains he took to keep his voice even, it still came out hoarse. His fingers tightened on the cup. The tea in it had cooled, unfinished. As the moment stretched, he lost control of his strength. With a sickening *crack*, the cup shattered, and tea splashed onto the mirror's surface.

Amber liquid blurred the scene within. Chu Wanning could faintly make out Shi Mei's father summoning Hua Gui to his sickbed. He rose, barefoot, and spoke to her as if nothing was wrong. Smiling, he went to the door and—with his back to Hua Gui—lowered the bolt with a *click*.

He turned to face his wife. A twisted grimace appeared in the smeared reflection.

Shi Mei flinched. Suddenly he swept the mirror off the table, turning his face away. Tendons protruded from the back of his hands like twisted roots, every vein pulsing with terror and hate. After a moment, he buried his face in his hands.

His voice was heavy with utmost exhaustion. "He…" He fell silent after the first word. "This *beast*…" Loathing threatened to crash over him like a wave; a storm of scathing hate roiled in his throat, yet the tempest's fury died before it reached his lips. Everything he wanted to say fought to leap first from his tongue, and so instead he was rendered mute.

Shi Mei took a moment to master himself. He'd likely watched this scene in the mirror play out many times, but despite the years that'd gone by, his abhorrence still threatened to overwhelm him. Slowly, he stopped trembling. That maelstrom of hatred emerged as merely a few unassuming words:

"That day, my holy father ate my mother alive."

Chapter 299:
A Lifetime Spent Running

CHU WANNING'S FACE went white as a sheet.

Watching him, Shi Mei began to laugh—half in grief and half in madness. "That's right," he said. "My father ate my mother alive. She was still alive… I ran over when I heard the screaming. I didn't know what was happening—I knocked on the door and shouted, *Mother, what's wrong, what's wrong*… Nobody replied. On the other side of the door, she never stopped screaming."

Shi Mei's lips parted softly around his next words. "Then the door did open."

The silence that followed was too like the stillness that'd seized him when those doors had opened—his father, his mouth smeared with blood; his mother, her arm mutilated by his teeth; the boy whose soul seemed to have been split in two.

He'd only been nine.

His father had gone insane. The flesh of a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast could improve cultivation—since he'd nearly died because of her, this was the least she owed him! And the abomination in front of him—this vile abomination, this cursed whelp that'd brought karmic punishment upon him! His father's eyes were warped with madness. He reached out, hands sticky with gore, for the child that was as still as a statue, chilled to the bone and incapable of saying a word.

Shi Mei still hadn't grasped what was going on. He stared dazedly at the scene before him, bereft of fear or sadness. It was like he'd been drained dry in the blink of an eye, an empty shell stuck standing in the doorway.

The man's hands drew closer, so close a drop of warm blood landed firmly on his cheek like a scarlet tear. Shi Mei looked up blankly at this unfamiliar monster. "Dad…?"

"Run!" Behind him, Hua Gui's shriek tore from her lungs. "A-Nan, run!"

Her arm had been torn apart and her legs were shattered. The woman writhed madly toward her husband like a maggot, desperately trying to inch close enough to grab his legs.

"Run! Run *now*! Don't turn around! Don't come back!"

A long, shrill scream split the air. His father had whirled around and ground her face beneath his bare foot. Hua Gui's cheek was pressed to the floor, one golden tear slipping from the corner of her eye.

"Run…" she croaked.

With a *crack*, her windpipe was crushed.

Run, she'd said.

Shi Mei had never stopped running. Every moment of every hour of every day and ceaseless night, he ran with the same frenzy with which he'd escaped Tianyin Pavilion, dragging himself through the wilderness. He ran for his life—he ran until he couldn't bear it anymore—he ran until he was falling apart.

He'd already fallen apart.

No matter where he fled or how long passed, he could still hear his mother's final terrifying shriek. *Run! Run now!*

He ran from unfamiliar streets into barren wastes and tore through golden fields of wheat; he ran from the darkness of night until the arrow of dawn pierced the skies and dyed the world red. Red as blood, scarlet like the blood that'd poured from her body, that'd dripped from his mouth.

"Ah… Ahhh!"

His mouth shaped a formless wail. His shoes had fallen away a long time ago; the soles of his feet had torn and festered, embedded with sharp rocks and covered in bloody blisters. Golden tears poured down his cheeks. He whimpered like a trapped beast as he pushed through stands of reeds and into thorny brambles, leaving bloody footprints.

He was too afraid to stop. He didn't dare look for a smoother road; he ran with everything he had along the first path he saw. He couldn't stop, because if he stopped, he'd die. He would surely die.

So he never did.

A decade passed in the blink of an eye. He never dared to stop. He'd die. A Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast would die if they didn't go home.

"When Xue-zunzhu found me, I was terrified. The Tianyin Pavilion master was looking everywhere for me. I was too scared to tell the truth, or to cry. Xue-zunzhu asked me where I was from and where my parents were, so I lied," murmured Shi Mei. "He took me back to Sisheng Peak. A few years later, a member of the Butterfly-Boned clan my mother had rescued found me—she'd been disguised as a Tianyin Pavilion disciple. To avoid suspicion, she'd scarred her own face when she entered the sect. She escaped my father's scrutiny and brought me all my mother's things.

"All those years, she'd been collecting demonic records, the names of Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts, budding Flowers of Eightfold Sorrows, and all the methods she'd studied of opening a door to the demon realm. It filled a heavy chest."

Chu Wanning slowly closed his eyes. "So you carried out the plan in her stead. Did what she'd always dreamed of doing."

"Yes. I continued cultivating the medicinal arts. I didn't want the sect leader to suspect anything, so I used the name Hua Binan whenever I left the peak. Hua Binan's acclaim grew and grew, until even Jiang Xi had heard of me. He invited me into the sect, and I followed my mother's example. Although Guyueye had once kept Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts like livestock, though they'd raised my mother in captivity—to carve out a place for myself in the cultivation world and attain what I needed to go home, I agreed. From then on, I wore two faces. Disciple of Sisheng Peak, healer of Guyueye." Shi Mei paused.

"Later still, the pavilion master died, and Mu-jiejie took his place. She'd been searching all that time for the person who murdered her adoptive mother. At the start, I was too afraid to trust even her. But after some probing, I made up my mind to go to Tianyin Pavilion in search of her. I confessed everything." Shi Mei smiled, though his eyes were still dark with misery. "As Shizun can see…my gamble paid off. She is my staunchest supporter."

Chu Wanning stayed silent.

"Though she's not a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast, she saw my mother as her own, and she sees the Butterfly-Boned clan as her family. She's been helping me all these years."

Helping Hua Binan, helping Shi Mei, helping her half brother.

Shi Mei tidied up the shards of the teacup and slipped the mirror back into his qiankun pouch.

The rain pounded against the windows like the unquiet spirits of all those Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts who'd died in misery. Hua Gui, Shi Mei's mother, was surely among their number. She was howling, *Run…run now…don't stop, don't look back…*

"There's no other way." Shi Mei kneaded wearily at his brow, his voice a low rasp. "Shizun, we have no other way. There's only the choice between wiping out humanity or our own oblivion and…I can't choose the latter."

Lightning split the sky like a dagger, like the world was ending. The storm worsened, thunder pounding like the hooves of a dark cavalry across the sky. In the blinding flashes of light, sodden leaves ripped from their branches.

Wushan Palace's doors slammed open, and the rain-soaked gale funneled into the room. Pale lightning illuminated their faces as they turned to see Mu Yanli standing in the doorway. She held no umbrella; water dripped into her frantic eyes. "A-Nan, we need only thirty more Zhenlong pawns. We've nearly reached the doorway to the demon realm."

Shi Mei jolted to his feet, fingertips trembling. "Where's Taxian-jun? Thirty pawns are nothing to him. Hurry up and have him finish, and then…"

His voice died as Mu Yanli neared—terror outweighed joy on her face. "Taxian-jun collapsed. His heartbeat is…"

"Is…?" prompted Shi Mei.

"Is in chaos. The flow of his spiritual energy is breaking apart, like he'll never wake up—"

"Impossible!" Shi Mei raged. "That's his own core—I adjusted it over a thousand times; it wouldn't suddenly fall apart. How—"

He froze.

A bolt of lightning ripped through the sky with a colossal *boom*. In the wake of that deafening crash, he slowly turned. Face deathly pale, he looked at Chu Wanning, bound hand and foot on the bed.

"Was it…" His lips parted. "Was it…you?"

The violence of the storm outside made the interior of the room feel all the quieter, as close and still as a grave. The flickering candlelight danced like the soul flags of the dead. Chu Wanning's eyes fluttered shut. He opened them and looked at Shi Mei.

"Yes," he said. "It was me."

Thunder pealed as if to tear the heavens apart. The earth shuddered, and rain poured down to drown the world.

Shi Mei shuddered. He took a halting step forward. "How…how can you still…"

"Since you've told me a bit about your past," said Chu Wanning, his voice low and very steady, "I'll tell you a bit about mine. In the past life, my spiritual core was broken, leaving me only the power of Jiuge. I didn't know my own origins, and I was powerless against Taxian-jun."

Golden light erupted at his wrists. With a series of clanks, the chains broke and the talismans burned. Chu Wanning rose from the bed, phoenix eyes blazing. "In this life, he's held me captive long enough for me to sink the spells into his heart." Chu Wanning's face was wiped clean of emotion; there was no sorrow, grief, pity, or regret. Nothing but the placid stillness of the dead. "As the spells burrow deeper, they'll disrupt his spiritual energy and stop his heart. This perfect weapon of yours has been destroyed by my hand. I'm sorry, Hua Binan. I cannot let you return home."

Shi Mei had never dreamed of a twist like this. His face was whiter than jade and colder than ice; he stared disbelievingly at Chu Wanning, lips quivering.

"It ends here," said Chu Wanning. Light flared in his palms.

"You're insane!" Staring at that golden light, Shi Mei seemed to go mad, his eyes flashing with bestial wildness. "You're going to kill him?! *You're* going to kill him… How could you—how can you *bear to*?!"

No one could read the emotion that flickered in Chu Wanning's dark eyes. "I can," he said.

The golden light brightened, but Chu Wanning's face was beginning to crumple. Though he was but a branch from the Flame Emperor's tree, he had an instinctive grasp of many of the sacred tree's heavenly spells. Tianwen's Ten Thousand Coffins had been born of these hazy impressions. He'd once thought this mere chance, but now he knew the truth. As a piece of the sacred tree itself, he'd been imprinted with the spell markings of the god Shennong. If he reached into his memory, he could recall ancient techniques like the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death—and the one he was using for the first time now: Corpse Destruction.

This spell had originated in that primordial battle between gods and demons. Most of the humans on earth were grievously injured in the battle, and the survivors were awash in a sea of corpses. They soon fell sick, infected and ill. By then, Fuxi was bent on dealing with the rest of the demons, and the injured Nüwa had sunken into the sleep of a primordial deity. Shennong was the only one left who could save them.

The god of medicine sank the Flame Emperor's colossal tree into the East Sea. The sacred tree's crown scraped the heights of the heavens and its roots plumbed the depths of the earth; it possessed countless branches and infinite fruits.

"Sacred Tree, Ten Thousand Coffins."

Every last root of the Flame Emperor's sacred tree tunneled beneath the East Sea and blanketed the cultivation world in an instant. All those roots, thick or thin, rough or delicate, rose from the earth in a shower of dirt.

"Decimate. Retract!"

The roots had enveloped every rotting corpse and crushed them to ash. The sea of corpses disappeared, and the ashes became fertile soil from which splendid flowers bloomed. Having completed its first mission since settling into the world, the tree recalled its roots to the East Sea.

Or so it was recounted in the oldest records of the Flame Emperor's sacred tree.

Light blazed in Chu Wanning's eyes. This was one of Shennong's spells, one he could only use because he was part of the sacred tree. Now that he had called upon it, that person would be reduced to ash, leaving nothing behind.

He was just a corpse, Chu Wanning thought in agony. There was no reason to stay his hand.

"You—Chu Wanning, you…" Shi Mei stared at him, eyes flashing with fury and madness. All his planning across two lifetimes had culminated in this moment—he couldn't allow Chu Wanning to succeed. "Stop right there!"

Chu Wanning looked up calmly. Just as he had that rainy day all those years ago, when he watched the boy Shi Mei standing beneath the study hall's roof at Sisheng Peak.

He had never suspected Shi Mei was secretly a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast. His earliest impressions of him had come from what other people said. A child had come to Sisheng Peak, one who worked tirelessly but couldn't use any spells due to the weakness of his spiritual core. Because of his lack of innate gifts, none of the elders would take him for their disciple. Even Xuanji, upon testing the boy's spiritual roots, had regretfully declined.

That day, rain had streamed off the black tile of the eaves. A child as fresh as a blossoming lotus looked helplessly up at the sky, clutching a thick stack of books to his chest.

Chu Wanning blinked as he recognized the little outcast. "You?"

He stepped toward him, his oilpaper umbrella held high.

"Ah, Yuheng Elder." Startled, the little thing hastily lowered his head, that pile of books almost brushing his chin. He struggled to keep his balance as he bowed. "Good evening, Elder."

"It's so late. You're still at the study hall?"

"I-I can't help it; there's too much to read. I didn't finish in time."

Chu Wanning glanced down, his eyes landing on the book at the top of the pile: *Compendium of Guyueye's Healing Arts*.

The boy looked abashed, his cheeks coloring prettily. “I’m a bit slow; all I can do is read about the medicinal arts. Not that I think Guyueye is better…”

Baffled, Chu Wanning frowned. “It’s just a book. Don’t be so anxious.”

The boy’s head drooped, shoulders curling in. “This disciple misspoke.”

On his small and slender frame, that desperate attempt to make himself inconspicuous plucked at Chu Wanning’s heartstrings. He couldn’t help but recall what the other elders had said:

“That Shi Mei is certainly well-behaved. Too bad he’s not got much of a gift.”

“Truth is he’s not suited to cultivation. Heh, I don’t know what the sect leader was thinking. Why take in someone with no real potential? If it was only out of pity, let him be a cook or a dishwasher at Mengpo Hall; it’s not a bad solution.”

“But he seems to have an interest in the medicinal arts. Tanlang, you won’t consider taking him?”

“No,” the Tanlang Elder had replied languidly. “I don’t like my disciples too soft.”

Chu Wanning held out the umbrella, raindrops plinking from the oiled paper like dropped pearls. The fingers around its handle were fine-boned and slender. “Let’s go,” said Chu Wanning. “It’s late. I’ll walk you back.”

A little white wildflower trembled on the roof. Shi Mei blinked, then bowed deeply before ducking underneath the umbrella.

They had walked into the distance beneath the gentle rain.

Today that boy’s eyes were the crimson of blood, his whole body tensed like a bow about to snap. “Chu Wanning!” he snarled. “Why must you obstruct me?! It’s too late! The dead are dead—thirty more won’t make a difference! Thirty more paltry lives to save so many of the Butterfly-Boned clan. After thousands of years, we can finally go home. Why *now*? What gives you the right?!”

His rage matched the storm's, yet he resembled a blinded and declawed dragon. Not a wisp of that old gentleness remained.

"Those dead cultivators won't come back to life even if you destroy Taxian-jun. Even if he's ruined, this realm is unsalvageable, but you… *Why*…"

"To close the Space-Time Gate before divine punishment arrives," said Chu Wanning evenly. "This world may be unsalvageable, but the other can be saved."

"I only need thirty more lives!"

"Even one more life is one too many." Chu Wanning closed his eyes, the light from his hands reaching its blinding peak. "Tianwen, *Ten Thousand Coffins*!"

A muffled *boom* answered his hoarse cry, just as when Shennong cleared the corpses millennia ago. He slammed his hands together.

Far away, in the back mountain, willow vines wound tightly around the unconscious Taxian-jun.

Shi Mei's lips had gone bloodless, his pupils shrinking to dots. "How could you be so cruel? Denying us our last hope of survival. Killing your own disciple. I only… I only wanted thirty lives…"

One world covered in corpses, the other on the cusp of destruction. Who knew what calamities were to come once the demon realm's gates opened? The demon clans had been bloodthirsty and violent since ancient times; only after Gouchen's betrayal and Fuxi's brutal onslaught were they forced out of the mortal realm. It wasn't a matter of thirty more lives—and even if it was, who deserved to die? Who should be sacrificed to pave the way home for the Butterfly-Boned clan?

Golden light gleamed between his palms and shone in Shi Mei's eyes. The bright glow threatened to gouge out his heart; Shi Mei struggled toward him, but a barrier had risen before Chu Wanning. He couldn't get close.

Without Taxian-jun, Shi Mei was like a butcher without his knife, armed only with his mortal hands. Neither he nor Mu Yanli was a match for Chu Wanning. Gripped by despair, Shi Mei's eyes turned so red they

seemed to drip blood. What could he do? What should he do?! What should —

There was still one thing he could use. Like a hunter facing down ferocious prey, staggering toward his pack for the final weapon he possessed, he hurled the last of his hopes at the man bent on destroying his life's work. "Very well. Very well. Shizun, you're the ruthless one. Go on then. Go ahead. Do what you will."

Baffled by his sudden change in attitude, Chu Wanning watched warily as Shi Mei flung his head back and burst into laughter, a hand over his face. He looked down and fixed his eyes on Chu Wanning, every word ground to dust between his teeth. "Go ahead, Shizun. Reduce him to nothingness. You and I will both lose—we can both end up a wreck!"

Mu Yanli's eyes stung at the sight of him so crazed. "A-Nan…" she whispered.

But Shi Mei couldn't hear her. With the frantic desperation of a cornered beast, he spat with blood and venom, "Go on, kill him. *Kill him*."

Shi Mei's lightless eyes peered from between his fingers, pinned on Chu Wanning. "Along with the last cognizance soul inside him," he snarled. "The soul that loves you still!"

Chapter 300:
Hearts Aligned

THE LIGHT OF THE STORM shone through the open doors of the hall, flashes of lightning cutting through the shadows on Shi Mei's face. Even in that burst of brightness, his eyes were dark and deep, as if not even holy fire could set them alight.

The fiery blaze between Chu Wanning's hands guttered, and his jaw clenched. But he didn't take the bait. Nothing Shi Mei said right now could be trusted.

Yet Shi Mei clutched at that flicker of hesitation like a piece of driftwood amidst whirling waves. "Shizun, you didn't *really* think Mo Ran was fully dead, did you? You didn't *really* think…" He gasped. "Taxian-jun was just a hollow shell? Shizun, think about it: What corpse could think so concretely, act so decisively? Who could create a revenant like that? With what technique? Not even the Zhenlong Chess Formation could accomplish it."

Chu Wanning said nothing.

"Don't you know?" Shi Mei stared into Chu Wanning's eyes, slowly unearthing this buried secret. "There's a cognizance soul still in Taxian-jun's body."

A flinch.

Earlier, Chu Wanning's gaze had the hollow quality of a dead man walking—but now Shi Mei saw something shift inside those phoenix eyes. He let out a breath of relief but stayed on guard. "Shizun, you know my spiritual core is weak; I can't work powerful spells. I can't use the Zhenlong Chess Formation, but the medicinal arts have their ways."

He remembered the moment he saw Taxian-jun lying quiet and unmoving in that grave before the Heaven-Piercing Tower, dead by his own hand. At the time, he had no idea where he'd gone wrong. His mind was blank with shock—how could his sharpest weapon, his ultimate soldier, take his own life? The Flower of Eightfold Sorrows should've consumed

the last of Mo Ran's conscience ages ago. What could possibly torment him enough to drive him to suicide?

"When the ten great sects of the past life charged Sisheng Peak and saw Mo Ran's body, they wanted to have him drawn and quartered. I was among them; leveraging my reputation as a famous healer, I persuaded them otherwise and preserved the body."

He scanned Chu Wanning's face for any trace of emotion. "I couldn't afford to lose his strength, so I set myself the task of making him into a walking corpse. Even if he wasn't as strong as before, he would do. But you must know—he died longing for a certain person. An intense attachment was anchored deep in his heart, so strong I couldn't scrub it out of his soul no matter what I did."

Shi Mei took a step closer. "I tried everything to banish it, but that soul never faded. The soul that led his barely lucid mind to the Heaven-Piercing Tower," said Shi Mei carefully. "The soul that yearned for you."

He came to a stop in the middle of the hall. He could see Chu Wanning's ashen face, his tightly compressed lips, the protruding tendons of his hands. Nothing could be more reassuring than the sight of his pain and hesitation. Slowly, Shi Mei regained his earlier composure. "That soul wasn't reincarnated. It lingered inside Taxian-jun's corpse; that was why he was so obsessed with you after coming back to life. As for Mo-zongshi… I'm sure you could tell. He wasn't as besotted with you when he was reborn. He fell in love with you again later."

He unveiled one truth after another, his eyes never leaving Chu Wanning's face. "Taxian-jun's dead body contains his stubbornest love for you."

Chu Wanning's fingertips were trembling. Shi Mei licked his lips, slipping forward like a wily snake, his words a sibilant appeal. "Shizun, can't you see? I just need thirty more people. Thirty more, in exchange for Mo Ran's last soul. Won't you say yes?"

Wind howled outside, everything lost in the wild tempest. He awaited Chu Wanning's reply. It was a generous offer, he thought. The man before him looked aloof, but he'd destroyed both his lives for love. Shi Mei was certain he would agree.

Chu Wanning lowered his gaze. Nobody could see his expression. “You say there’s still a wisp of soul inside him.”

“Mn.”

“If thirty people are sacrificed to pave the rest of your road home, you’ll spare him?”

“Exactly.”

Chu Wanning paused, murmuring to himself, “Then all those things he said when he saw me again were genuine.”

Anyone could be convinced as long as one grasped their weakness. Even the Beidou Immortal was no different. Convinced of his success, Shi Mei relaxed. “That’s right, it was all genuine. Though he’s not like Mo Ran before he was marred, he still has a soul at least. He still has his own mind. Shizun,” Shi Mei said sweetly, “listen to me for once. You, me, and him—all three of us will be much better off.”

Chu Wanning was still looking at the floor. He sighed. “Shi Mingjing.”

“Hm?”

“Do you remember the wish you wrote in your letter when you made your formal request to become my disciple?”

That unexpected question brought Shi Mei up short. After some thought, he answered, “For succor and safe harbor.” Saying it aloud gave him an ominous feeling. “But at the time I was thinking of Shizun as family, I wasn’t talking about bringing the Butterfly-Boned clan home…”

Chu Wanning asked another question. “Do you know what wish Mo Ran wrote when he became my disciple?”

“…What?”

Chu Wanning finally looked up, his eyes dull with an apathy even more profound than his earlier silence. “He said he wanted a holy weapon like Tianwen. So he could save more lives.”

He spoke so coolly and without feeling, recounting his beloved’s bygone wish like it was an unimportant detail. Before Shi Mei could react,

golden light flooded the hall; a wave of ferocious spiritual energy surged through the air, keeping anyone from coming closer.

Shi Mei snapped back to his senses. "Chu Wanning!" he screamed, a shrill and twisted sound. "Chu Wanning! Have you gone mad?! You're mad!"

He threw himself against that blinding light in despair and fury, trying to get to the white-robed man at its center. At his side, Mu Yanli reached for him, spoke to him, helped him. But it was no use.

"Decimate. Retract!"

"No! Stop! *Stop!*" As Chu Wanning's voice echoed from within the golden blaze, Shi Mei flew into a greater frenzy, face warping as he howled and raged and cursed with all his might. But the golden light surged and crested. That blinding glow seared itself in his eyes, leaving splotchy afterimages dancing in his vision.

Then the light went out. The wind stilled, leaving only silence. Chu Wanning stood, white-faced, while Shi Mei knelt haggardly on the ground. The tide of spiritual energy slowly ebbed away. After a beat, they both heard a muffled rumble from the direction of the mountains—the sound of Taxian-jun's corpse being crushed to ash.

Shi Mei stared at Chu Wanning. The furious emotions warring on his face had died, leaving behind blankness; his hatred and his wrath cracked open to reveal raw terror. He didn't know what he was afraid of. Was it Chu Wanning, who could bear to kill Mo Ran with his own hands? The pendulous uncertainty of his own future? What was scaring him? The world was already ending.

Slowly, Shi Mei found his voice. "He's dead? He's…dead? Chu Wanning, you killed him? At the Red Lotus Pavilion, he once shielded you and begged me to corrupt him instead of you, but you killed him in cold blood. How could you…"

His terror turned into crazed laughter. He had no reason for mirth, but he threw his head back and cackled anyway. Beside him, Mu Yanli was crying. "A-Nan…enough…" Her words couldn't get through to him. "Enough…"

But Shi Mei only laughed. Golden tears slid from his cheeks to splash on the floor. "He's dead. Taxian-jun's dead…so be it. It's over. Well played, Chu Wanning, you heartless bastard. What an iron will you have."

Chu Wanning stood rooted to the spot, expressionless. He resembled a corpse—he *was* a corpse.

"Shizun, I underestimated you." Shi Mei's voice shook. "You're even more ruthless than I imagined."

It was as if Chu Wanning had lost the last of his warmth. He'd thought Mo Ran was gone, but now he'd learned one of his souls still existed, right here in his body. A shattered version of Mo Weiyu yet existed.

But he'd reduced those shards to dust.

Yes, he was ruthless. He had nothing to say in his defense. The boy, the youth, the man, his beloved who laughed and cried, in whole or in parts; his dearest; the only one in the world who respected him, indulged him, and didn't fear him; the lover who'd shielded him from catastrophe with his own flesh and blood; the man who'd been devoured by the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows in his place, who'd become the lord of darkness and tyrant over the world in his stead—the dummy who'd given everything to protect him the year he would've turned sixteen—would never come back.

So I can save more earthworms when it rains.

Shizun, I brought you some pear-blossom white.

The disciple present I have for you is really…really really really ugly.

Wanning. I missed you.

Once, he'd smilingly copied out the words—*to build countless houses that can shelter all the people in this world who don't have homes, so everyone can smile.*

Repay kindness, do not seek revenge.

Yet he'd drifted in a sea of blood for two whole lifetimes.

Do not seek revenge… Do not seek revenge…

"Me? I don't have any particular ambitions. I'm just happy to learn my spells. If anything happens, I'll be able to save a few more people."

In his youth—while he was still lucid—Mo Ran had once earnestly expressed this wish to Chu Wanning. Back then, he'd hoped from the bottom of his heart to help more people. Before he'd been subsumed within Taxian-jun's shadow, he'd stubbornly adored every wondrous living thing—such that he'd willingly give his soul to protect everyone who'd ever treated him with kindness.

"I might be a little dumb, but I'll do my best. Shizun can't blame me if I've tried my best, right?"

The young man in Chu Wanning's memories had chuckled and beamed as he made this appeal, scratching his head. His dimples were so sweet and deep they seemed to brim with pear-blossom white, leaving Chu Wanning with a lifelong intoxication.

He closed his eyes. His hands had finally begun to shake. He felt dizzy—a gentle breeze seemed to brush against his face, kissing his tear-soaked lashes. He thought he could hear Taxian-jun's voice, uncharacteristically soft and gentle. The words echoed in his ears, as if murmured against Chu Wanning's cheek.

My reputation and my dreams, my blood and flesh and beating heart—my soul, my corpse, and the ashes I've become. I'm sorry. That's all I ever had, and I've laid it all at the altar. I've done everything I can. Wanning, take care…

Chu Wanning's head snapped up, phoenix eyes swimming with tears. In the fractured light, he seemed to see Taxian-jun's soul before him, handsome and kind, smiling with joy and grief.

"Mo Ran…"

That soul that should've stayed as pristine as plum blossoms in winter shimmered before him. He bent to take Chu Wanning into his arms, kissing him and slipping his fingers between his lover's—and in Chu Wanning's embrace, he scattered like fallen petals.

"Something's happened!" A Tianyin Pavilion disciple charged into the hall, shouting, "Something's happened!"

Mu Yanli was the only one in the room who could still be considered calm. She turned, eyes glittering with tears, and snapped, “We know what happened to Taxian-jun, don’t—”

“What?” The disciple froze, then stamped his feet in baffled frustration. “Not Taxian-jun! All the cultivation realm’s sects are coming for us—they’re gathered at the base of the mountain right now!”

Chapter 301:
The Past Replayed

THE NEWLY FORMED volunteer army stood at the foot of the mountain, soaking in the rain. Cultivators from every sect were present. The Space-Time Gate had only been open a few days; no one knew what was happening, and all that lay before them were boundless dangers and lurking threats. This rudimentary alliance was an uneasy one, each party weighing their own options. Few were willing to stand in the vanguard. They feared the Zhenlong pawns lying in wait at this strange Sisheng Peak, worried they'd meet those revenant grandmasters they'd faced at Mount Jiao.

They looked up at the peak, eyes wide and fearful. Inside that rain-battered Wushan Palace, was there a slumbering monster ready to awaken and tear them all to shreds?

Someone holding a torch enchanted against the rain looked up and muttered, "I really didn't expect Tianyin Pavilion to do something like this… I still feel like I'm dreaming."

"Enough." Zhen Congming of Bitan Manor laid a hand on his shoulder. "If you've got the energy to moan and groan, you might as well focus on a plan of attack. Let's get this nightmare over with."

"I'm afraid it might not be that simple," someone else replied, expression somber. "Mu Yanli is of godly descent, and Hua Binan is one of the greatest medicinal cultivators of our time. As for that Emperor Taxian-jun—I mean Mo Ran—that guy's powerful and vicious. We'd best be careful; no one can let down their guard."

Several heads in the crowd nodded in agreement.

Had Xue Meng from the past life been standing among them, he'd have surely thought all the twists and turns of life had brought him right back to the beginning. The scene was identical to that night long ago, when the ten great sects had surrounded Sisheng Peak and Taxian-jun swallowed poison.

But the one among their number was not that Xue Meng, but rather the young man who'd just lost his parents. His features were still handsome, but his face was haggard. He wore not the bright silver-blue armor of Sisheng Peak but a plain set of blue robes, his ponytail fastened with a strip of white cloth as a sign of his mourning.

"No more chatter," said Xue Meng. "If we waste time here, things will only get worse. Who cares about who's most vicious or keeping your guard up… If you're scared, stay here. You don't have to come."

Everything proceeded along the same bygone tracks. As soon as Xue Meng spoke up, those around him burst into chatter. Once again, the crowd piled on:

"Xue-gongzi, watch your tongue. What do you mean, *scared*?" A cultivator of Jiangdong Hall glared at him, her slender brows twisting. "That's right, look how brave *you* are—just a few days ago, you brainlessly ran off to Wushan Palace to kill Taxian-jun. How did that go?"

Xue Meng fell silent.

"Weren't you defeated? Didn't Mei-shixiong have to help you clean up your mess?!"

"You—!"

A slender hand blocked Xue Meng's way, silver bells tinkling on a pale wrist. Xue Meng snapped, "This isn't your business!"

But Mei Hanxue looked cheery. "Of course it's my business; you're the son of my benefactors." He turned to smile at that girl, who'd flushed red upon realizing he'd witnessed her rudeness. "And of course I have to point it out when such a pretty lady speaks so coarsely. How else is she to correct her mistakes?" He continued earnestly: "Helping Xue Meng is helping a friend, not cleaning up a mess. With the heavens as my witness, I ask the lady not to impugn my honor."

Everyone in the jianghu knew of Mei-shixiong's allure. The girl fell instantly silent, her face redder than a pig's liver. At the sight of her flustered face, the young man with her felt the horns of cuckoldry sprouting from his head. He scoffed loudly. "How interesting. Xue-gongzi, you're a lion-hearted hero, and the rest of us are mewling cowards, is that right? Why don't you go up there first and scout for us, then? You know Sisheng

Peak best, and everyone's saying Emperor Taxian-jun is the previous incarnation of your cousin Mo Weiyu. He's not going to kill *you*, is he? You're the safest of any of us."

At the mention of Emperor Taxian-jun, many in the crowd looked abashed. When Mo-zongshi had first appealed to them, they'd called him a liar. Yet since then, everything that came to light had proven his words true. Many of them felt their consciences aching.

Still, not everyone agreed. An old cultivator twirled his mustache and cleared his throat. "That Emperor Taxian-jun's identity remains to be confirmed."

Xue Meng shot him a chilling look. "Confirmed how?"

"What I mean is, Taxian-jun looks like Mo Ran, but he might not really be his previous incarnation the way Mo Ran said. With masks of human skin and Zhenlong chess pieces, nothing's impossible."

"That's right. I still think the murderer at Guyueye was Mo Ran himself—forget past or present incarnations, that's just an excuse! A pretense!"

Even now there were those who insisted Mo-zongshi had been lying, that they'd done nothing wrong in condemning him. Some of them had made eloquent or scathing speeches against him at Tianyin Pavilion. Some had thrown stones and rotten vegetables during those three days of public trial and ridiculed him from the crowd. Admitting Mo-zongshi was right was tantamount to admitting they'd been tricked, manipulated into slandering a good man's name. The thought was much too embarrassing.

Admitting fault often took more courage than committing the fault in the first place; none of them were brave enough. Better to never allow Mo Ran's name to be cleared than to abandon their veneer of righteousness. No matter how much suffering or scorn Mo Ran endured, no matter how many accusations he bore—regardless of the two lifetimes he'd spent in agony—he would stay a sinner. To these so-called gentlemen, another's innocence would always be subordinate to their own pride.

Mei Hanxue's eyes curved into smiling crescents. "Sun-daozhang, you're truly possessed of unbending courage."

The old geezer blinked in confusion for a long moment before he realized it was a jibe. Furious, he would have rushed toward Mei Hanxue if the abbot of Wubei Temple hadn't stopped him.

"That's enough," said Master Xuanjing. "Benefactors, please stop arguing and listen to this old monk. It doesn't matter who Taxian-jun is; what matters is what we should do when we go up the mountain and how we should split our forces." He turned to Xue Meng, conciliatory. "Xue-gongzi, you've dueled Taxian-jun. In your view, how strong is he as a fighter?"

Xue Meng clenched his jaw, hands tightening into fists. "Better than all the sect leaders present combined."

"Ha!" Sun-daozhang raised one bushy eyebrow. "Darling of the heavens indeed—look how readily he praises others and humbles himself!"

Master Xuanjing, on the other hand, looked shocked. "Which is to say, he's likely much stronger than Chu-zongshi. No wonder Chu-zongshi was kidnapped…"

"Kidnapped? Don't we all know the filthy things that happened between Chu Wanning and Mo Ran by now? If you ask me, he wasn't kidnapped at all. Neither is Taxian-jun some kind of 'past self.' This whole thing is Mo Ran's doing, and Chu Wanning's in on it too! If you don't believe me, let's march up there and see!"

Xue Meng went pale as a sheet. Only a few weeks ago, he would've been first to snarl and punch that bag of bones' face in—but he'd only just learned the truth about his shizun and Mo Ran's relationship himself. The idea was still too repellent; he stood unmoving, face crumpling in silence.

A tall silhouette draped in pale green robes slid coolly in front of him, saving him from that painful predicament. Jiang Xi's voice rang out. "What a bold declaration, Sun-daozhang. If things aren't as you say once we march up the mountain, perhaps that conniving tongue of yours needn't remain in your mouth."

A muscle twitched in the old Daoist's jaw. His lips moved as if to speak, but he didn't dare talk back to Jiang Xi. After some half-hearted muttering, he fell silent.

Jiang Xi shot a look at Xue Meng but said nothing. He lowered his head in thought, then turned back to the others. “There’s no time. Let’s decide whom each of us will target, then begin our offense.” His eyes roved over the other sect leaders and elders, acknowledging each of them. “Aside from the Zhenlong pawns, who else do we know is atop Sisheng Peak?”

“We’ll certainly run into Mu Yanli,” someone replied immediately.

“Has anyone here fought her?”

A female cultivator raised her hand. “I matched her for a while during the chaos.”

“How was she?” asked Jiang Xi.

The girl thought about it. “Three elders should be enough to pin her down.”

“Good. We need three elders to keep her occupied once the battle starts. Any volunteers?”

Sisheng Peak detested Mu Yanli. Three of their elders immediately stepped forward: Xuanji, Tanlang, and Lucun. They were sect siblings and powerful in their own right, skilled in the roles of healer, attack, and support. Jiang Xi agreed without hesitation.

“Who else?” asked Jiang Xi.

“Some of her personal guard from Tianyin Pavilion. Exact numbers unknown, but there’re at least six or seven hundred of them. Their strength is also difficult to estimate.”

“Wubei Temple’s fighting style is closest to Tianyin Pavilion’s.” Jiang Xi turned to Master Xuanjing. “Abbot, can your disciples target Tianyin Pavilion’s people?”

“Ah…” Master Xuanjing weighed his options. The negatives were obvious. They didn’t know how many Tianyin Pavilion guards were present, or how strong they were. It was one thing if they were weak, but Wubei Temple would be decimated if they were strong. The positives, however, were tempting. If they were occupied with Tianyin Pavilion, they wouldn’t have to face Emperor Taxian-jun, the greatest terror on the peak. At last he nodded. “This old monk will gladly do his duty.”

"Which leaves Hua Binan…" Jiang Xi sighed, closing his eyes. "That one's clear-cut. Though Guyueye cannot profess to full knowledge of his every technique, he is at least from our sect. When the battle begins, I ask the elders of my own sect to go after him. Show him no mercy."

Only the Zhenlong pawns and Taxian-jun remained. Jiang Xi's gaze swept over the assembled crowd, but other than a few familiar faces, the rest seemed afflicted with a sickness of the spine—their heads bent so low some rubbed their necks as though they ached.

"Palace Leader?"

Ming Yuelou nodded. "Taxue Palace stands ready."

Jiang Xi turned to the head of Shangqing Pavilion. The elder nodded. "As do we."

The remaining sects were either cowardly or truly unsuited for combat. As their leaders hesitated, one mumbled, "Since Taxian-jun is capable of tearing open the Space-Time Gate, the strength of these sect leaders is definitely not enough."

"Right? Wouldn't we just be throwing our lives away?"

Another lamented: "If only Rufeng Sect was still here! Cultivators from all seventy-two cities and all those city lords… A crying shame."

"Hm?" A Jiangdong Hall cultivator raised her voice. "Where'd Ye Wangxi go? Isn't she a good fighter? She's probably worth ten of Nangong Liu; she's definitely on par with a sect leader. Run off, has she?"

Jiang Xi's face went dark with rage. "Before we left," he said scathingly, "we settled refugees at Guyueye. We needed a cultivator to stand guard in case the Zhenlong chess army came to our doors. No one else volunteered. Ye Wangxi stayed behind."

Embarrassed, that cultivator said, "Oh."

"Look at you, crying for a girl to come save you," Jiang Xi continued. "Some heroes you are."

Silence fell over the group—no one was willing to take the lead.

"Perhaps we should take more time to consider," the pretty sect leader of Jiangdong Hall ventured. "After all, this isn't a game. Why not

wait a little longer?"

The word *wait* made Xue Meng so furious his lips went white. Struggling to control his temper, he asked, "How much longer do you want to wait? Will things get safer if we stay here?"

"It's not like we can just run up there! We'll be going to our deaths!"

"Everything depends on this moment. Safety first, Young Master Xue."

Master Xuanjing spoke up as well. "Xue-gongzi, prudence is the greatest virtue right now. The world's in chaos and the Space-Time Gate has reappeared—no one can say what will happen next. The best the cultivation world has to offer are gathered here—but if the worst happens and all is lost, who will be left to take responsibility?"

"That's right! If our sect leaders all perish here, what will we do…"

Try as he might, Xue Meng could no longer hold himself back. His head snapped up, revealing bloodshot eyes. "You're already thinking about what to do if we fail. Your sect leaders *aren't* dead! What about Sisheng Peak?!"

Everyone abruptly recalled the unjust accusations leveled at the sect leader and his wife, and their untimely deaths. The cultivators averted their eyes or lowered their heads in shame.

"What is Sisheng Peak supposed to do now?" Xue Meng's voice was hoarse. "I've lost my cousin, my shixiong, my mom and dad, and now even my shizun is…" His lashes quivered. The jut of his throat bobbed as he tried desperately to swallow his agony back down into his stomach, but it was too much. He couldn't bear it anymore. He blinked slowly. "You fear death because you still have reasons to live. I don't, so I'm not afraid to die."

Mei Hanxue frowned and stepped toward him. "Xue Meng!"

But why should he listen? No one left on earth could stop him. "If you're all too afraid," said Xue Meng, "I'll go myself."

"Young master!" The disciples of Sisheng Peak tried to pull him back, but Xue Meng's mind was set on vengeance. He strode off without

looking back. The hurt and anger he'd kept bottled up slid down his cheeks as tears, soaking into the ground where no one could see.

Jiang Xi stood in the rain, staring at his retreating silhouette. "You…"

At the sound of his voice, Xue Meng walked faster to get away. His Longcheng had shattered—he didn't even have a proper sword anymore, but he turned doggedly toward the lofty spires of Sisheng Peak, leaving them all in his wake.

After some hesitation, Jiang Xi shouted hoarsely, "Xue Meng!"

He rushed to catch up to him, but before he could lay a hand on Xue Meng's shoulder, the young man whirled, his bright, birdlike eyes flashing with rage.

"Go away!" he snarled. "Don't touch me!" He flung Jiang Xi's hand aside, refusing to let him get a word in, and started up the mountain.

Moss carpeted the stone steps; bamboo swayed in the mountain forests.

Xue Meng ran, panting, through the torrential storm. The rain softened the world around him into a dreamlike blur.

Here, Madam Wang had once gardened by moonlight and watched a peony unfurl its petals. There, Xue Zhengyong had returned in glory from some mission or other, his body strong and his smile bright with victory. As Xue Meng passed a set of steps, he saw Shi Mei murmuring with his head bowed; when he ran by the hero's pillar, he saw Mo Ran staring up at the moon. Through that curtain of water, he saw the noisy bustle of disciples returning after their classes, filling the halls and bridges with lively chatter.

He ran as if fleeing for his life, like a tiger seeking refuge in a far-off forest. Out of the corner of his eye he saw an old peach tree; a younger version of himself knelt beneath it, performing the formal bows before looking up, smiling, at the white-robed Chu Wanning.

"The disciple Xue Meng greets Shizun."

He squeezed his eyes shut. Too much of his past lay on Sisheng Peak. Every memory seared his insides. All the splendid bonfires that'd burned here had become grief-choked ash.

The storm beat at Xue Meng as he ran, chased by his recollections of the past. "Don't follow me… Don't make me see these things…" he muttered, weaving between ghosts, running away from the happiest days of his youth. By the time he stood before the peak, he was soaked from head to toe—a phoenix chick with bedraggled wings, shivering in the damp.

It was cold. So cold his bones had turned into ice.

Rain dripped from his lashes as he narrowed his eyes, staring up at the solemn majesty of the palace, lit dimly with candles. So this was Sisheng Peak in the past life. He hadn't paid much attention when he'd come to kill Taxian-jun.

His eye snagged on a trio of gravestones erected before the Heaven-Piercing Tower. He'd never seen something like this in his own sect, and he couldn't help taking a closer look.

One of them said *Deep-Fried Empress*. One had been knocked over, the stone lying askew in the mud. The third was very old and very plain. The murky silhouette of a man stood before it, his back to Xue Meng. His robes were blood-stained, his sleeves broad enough to brush the ground as he ran his hand over the words engraved on the stone.

Xue Meng flinched. It was as though an arrow had pierced his head; all the blood in his body poured into his skull as he shouted, "Mo Ran!"

He groped for Longcheng to carve him in half, but the scabbard that usually hung from his belt was gone. It was a beat before he remembered Longcheng was broken—shattered the first time he crossed swords with Emperor Taxian-jun. But the man seemed deaf to his shouts. He knelt in front of the grave, slowly, as if, after an exhausting journey, he'd come at last to his final destination. Xue Meng watched as he pressed his forehead to the icy stone.

Flame flared to life in Xue Meng's palms, golden light sizzling. He leapt forward and slammed the spell down on Taxian-jun's back.

There was a massive *boom*. Yet when the light faded, his fire hadn't injured anyone. There was only the shattered moss-covered gravestone. Stunned, Xue Meng looked around. There was no Emperor Taxian-jun, no wraith dressed in black—no one at all. He was alone.

Rain poured around him. All the plants bent under its force, as if to leave him the last thing standing on earth. But in the rustling of the trees in the wind, he seemed to hear an army crouched in the forest and the shrubbery, ready to launch an attack at any minute.

"Taxian-jun! *Taxian-jun*!"

Xue Meng's howls were shattered by the thunder and ground to dust. Had he been mistaken? How could he have been?! That figure had been real and vivid; he'd been standing just there, reaching out to touch the gravestone. The gravestone had said—

Xue Meng froze.

He bent down, crouching in the mud to piece the stone he'd shattered back together. Halfway through, his blood ran cold. The inscription said:

Grave of My Teacher, Chu Wanning

Whose grave was this?! Whose grave?!

Xue Meng reeled backward. Lightning flashed, its light stark on his horrified face. He shook his head, mumbling. "No…no… Impossible. How could it be?"

He swallowed, forcing his panic down. Still crouched on the ground, Xue Meng took a breath and shook his head to clear it. He squinted down at the gravestone. Its surface was mottled—it looked at least ten years old, not new. The front was unevenly gouged, as if some original engraving had been scraped off and replaced with those six words.

Grave of My Teacher, Chu Wanning.

Did his shizun from the past life lay buried here?

Xue Meng's lips were bloodless; his whole body was shaking. His heart churned with something—heartbreak, rage, or fear, he couldn't say. He buried his face in his hands, scrubbing the rainwater away. His head was a mess. What kind of tangled threads of love and hate were knotted through that lifetime he didn't know about? He couldn't guess. Just as he couldn't guess what had once been inscribed into this gravestone, or why it was later changed.

He didn't know any of it.

Xue Meng pressed his hands over his eyes. When he opened them, that black and gold silhouette had reappeared. This close, Xue Meng could see the gold embroidery of landscapes and howling dragons chasing tigers on his clothes. The wraith wasn't quite a soul, but it wasn't a living person, neither flesh and blood nor a disembodied spirit.

The apparition gazed up at the Heaven-Piercing Tower, and Xue Meng seemed to hear him murmur, "Shizun, please…pay attention to me." That voice was so faint it hardly sounded real. "I want to come home, I'm coming home." Confusion and bewilderment colored his voice. "Coming home… Shizun…"

Lightning forked across the sky with an almighty *boom*, like a hammer struck deep into the earth. The mountains around them seemed to quake, a vibration that left his bones buzzing.

"But I don't have a home…" The black-robed silhouette spun around. Even through the deluge, Xue Meng could see his face—Mo Ran's face—with perfect clarity, but Mo Ran couldn't seem to see him.

"I don't have a home…" he mumbled. "I want to go back…I want to go back!" he cried, fretful and despairing. "Let me go back, let me go back! I want to see him… I want to see him!"

In the flashing lightning and pealing thunder, that black apparition rose into the air, catching Xue Meng off guard. An arctic gust of wind tore through his clothes, the bone-chilling cold even more intense than the rain. Stricken, Xue Meng collapsed to the ground, eyes squeezed shut against the gale.

"I can't die… *I need to see him*!"

Mo Ran's howl echoed in his ears as the wraith swept toward the back mountains of Sisheng Peak. By the time Xue Meng came to his senses, there was no trace of that ghostly apparition—but a blinding red light had lit up the faraway mountains.

What had happened? What was that shadow—a ghostly soul?

Face bone-white, Xue Meng stood unmoving until he felt a hand on his shoulder.

Xue Meng jolted. Mad and helpless, he cried, “Who’s there? Who’s there?!”

Mei Hanxue pressed down firmly. “Don’t worry! It’s just me.”

From the forest behind him came a hideous-looking member of Taxue Palace with pale green eyes Xue Meng knew well. It was Mei Hanxue’s glacier-cold elder brother, wearing a mask of human skin. Mei Hänxue stepped out of the trees holding two swords. One was his own holy weapon Shuofeng, while the other—

“Xuehuang.” Mei Hänxue pressed Jiang Xi’s sword into Xue Meng’s shaking hands. “Jiang-zhangmen asked me to bring this to you. He said that you could use it—that you shouldn’t reject it for petty reasons.”

The younger brother looked at Xue Meng curiously. “Can I ask you a question? Who is Jiang Xi to you, really?”

“It’s time.” His elder brother flatly cut him off. He shot a glance at Xue Meng. “Let’s go to Wushan Palace and see how Chu-zongshi is faring.”

He prodded Xue Meng’s shoulder with the hilt of Shuofeng, then dove into the curtain of rain. His twin sighed. He patted Xue Meng on the head, then followed his brother toward the storm-swept Wushan Palace.

Chapter 302:
Soul Sundered at Wushan Palace

WUSHAN PALACE had once been Sisheng Peak's Loyalty Hall. After Taxian-jun declared himself its master, it was split into three—the front, middle, and back halls.

The Mei brothers were waiting at the doors by the time Xue Meng trudged over. "There's something wrong with the palace," said the elder brother as Xue Meng drew close. "It's full of illusion miasma."

"What's that?"

"An arcane fog," Mei Hanxue explained. "It's in the plum blossom forest at Taxue Palace year-round."

"What does it do?" asked Xue Meng, face paling.

"Trespassers get lost in it. It has no effect on your own people, but outsiders will see a labyrinth of illusions and wander in circles. You know when regular folks talk about getting lost and ending up back where they started? It's like that."

Xue Meng fell silent.

"They're stalling for time," Mei Hänxue said coldly. "Something's happening in the back halls right now."

"What do you think?" asked Mei Hanxue. "Can we go around it?"

Mei Hänxue shot him a look. "Have you not spent the last twenty years of your life at Taxue Palace? Is that even a question?"

His little brother hesitated, then awkwardly cleared his throat before turning to Xue Meng. "There's nothing for it. We have to find the source of the fragrant fog and dispel it." Seeing the look on Xue Meng's face, he sought to comfort him. "Don't worry, I'm great at this. I'm always ducking into the plum forest miasma in Taxue Palace's back mountains to hide from girls chasing me. I'll have this dealt with in no time."

The mention of his admirers brought the storm clouds rolling over Mei Hänxue's face. "Why do you sound so proud of it?" His voice was

freezing.

Xue Meng wasn't in the mood to listen to them banter. He strode forward and pushed open the doors of Wushan Palace.

The red-lacquered doors creaked open like the stinking maw of a vengeful ghost. Candles flickered within the waiting silence. Xue Meng stepped over the threshold, registering the faint floral scent. When he turned, the Mei brothers were gone. They'd likely all see different sights until the fog was dispelled; until then, they were on their own.

A familiar voice rang out from the lofty throne. "Xue Meng."

Cold wind gusted through the dark and diaphanous drapes hung in the hall. Startled, Xue Meng cried, "Mo Ran?!"

"It's you, right?" Mo Ran rasped. "Have you come?"

Xue Meng swallowed hard, nerves wound taut as he walked further into the dimly lit hall with Xuehuang held before him. He brushed the layered drapes aside with the tip of his sword and beheld the speaker.

Atop a lofty dais sat a man sprawled on a gilt throne with his eyes closed, his face handsome and pale beneath a beaded crown. His brows were dark and his features sharp, his nose straight and finely shaped. His thin lips were pursed in an unreadable expression.

Taxian-jun.

The pallor of his face was unnatural, tinged a corpse's ashy gray—the effects of some terrible poison. A platter of fruit sat in front of him, replete with rosy apples and indigo grapes. The richest colors of the realm were arrayed before him, but the man on the throne didn't so much as glance at the plate.

Was it an illusion? Was it real? Xue Meng couldn't tell. His ears rang; when he came back to his senses, he heard his own voice speaking. "Mo Ran, you…"

Taxian-jun's eyes remained closed, as if in sleep. "What is it?"

Perhaps the man atop the throne looked too fragile, or perhaps Xue Meng had already vented his rage in the pouring rain earlier. Facing the illusion, Xue Meng felt more weariness than anger. "Why did you do all of this? Is this a second life for you? You and Shizun…are you two really…?"

What was the point of asking all this? He didn't even know if Mo Ran would reply. Still, he mumbled blankly, giving voice to the questions that had piled up in his heart until they'd nearly crushed him beneath their weight.

As expected, Taxian-jun's only answer was a low hum. His eyes fluttered open, and he looked at Xue Meng through the flickering light and shadow. "Come to think of it, it's been two years since the last time you and Shizun met face-to-face—since your farewell at Kunlun Taxue Palace."

Xue Meng faltered. "What?"

Mo Ran smiled faintly. "Xue Meng, do you miss him?"

Xue Meng shook. "What do you mean, Kunlun Taxue Palace? What do you mean two years. What are you saying?!"

The illusion in front of him was merely replaying Taxian-jun's final conversation with Xue Meng, just before the Mo Ran of the past life had succumbed to the poison. These were Taxian-jun's last words. The miasma took on whatever form it willed, and coincidentally shaped the scene of their last meeting in the past life.

But this version of Xue Meng had no inkling of any of this. He was bewildered and infuriated, vexed and afraid. He glared at the man on the throne and shouted, "What the hell are you talking about?"

Taxian-jun's eyes seemed to focus on the space just behind him, as if looking through the real, live Xue Meng to fix upon an incorporeal spirit. "Give him back to you? How foolish. Why don't you use your brain to think a little? Shizun and I share such an intense hatred for each other. How could I allow him to live in this world?"

Xue Meng fell silent. Yes…this was an illusion. Even if he said nothing, Taxian-jun would continue unhindered. He was talking to someone Xue Meng couldn't see.

But what was he talking about?

Xue Meng's ears were still ringing; he let Taxian-jun's words wash over him, incomprehensible. The man on the throne had eyes so cold and crazed, so dark with conflict and obsession that Xue Meng felt chilled all over. This wasn't his gege. He didn't know this man.

"Are you trying to remind me that he once beat me so hard that I was left covered with cuts and bruises?" Taxian-jun continued malevolently. "That he made me kneel before all to confess my crimes? Or did you want to remind me that for your sake, for the sake of all these insignificant nobodies, he stood in my way at every turn, ruining my great endeavors time and again?"

This tyrant resembled an ailing dragon, desperate to appear fierce even as he lay exhausted in the mud. His mutterings grew increasingly insane. He looked cruel and vicious, but he was so very tired.

"Still," said Taxian-jun. "We were once master and disciple. His body is resting in the Red Lotus Pavilion at the southern peak. He's been very well-preserved and lies there among the lotus blossoms, looking like he's only fallen asleep. His corpse is maintained by my spiritual powers. If you miss him, don't waste your breath here with me. Go now, before I die."

Xue Meng climbed the steps of the dais, Xuehuang clenched in his clammy hand. "What are you *talking* about?"

Who died in the last life?

Whose corpse rested in the Red Lotus Pavilion?

Whose corpse was maintained by Emperor Taxian-jun's spiritual powers to keep from rotting… *Who?*

Between Taxian-jun's ravings and the grave he'd seen at the Heaven-Piercing Tower, Xue Meng knew the answer in his heart. But shards of ice seemed to stab through his temples, preventing him from thinking; he was shaking so hard his lips were quivering.

Who was dead… *Who was dead?!*

Xue Meng's features twisted. He charged up the dais and grabbed Mo Ran's collar, but his fingers slipped through the illusion. Taxian-jun's face was inches from his. "Go," Taxian-jun rasped. "Go see him. Without my spiritual powers, he'll turn to dust. If you don't make it before I die, it'll be too late."

Taxian-jun closed his eyes in exhaustion. The poison was doing its fatal work. But Xue Meng's eyes were wide open, his whole body shuddering. How had things come to this? What absurd history had played

out in this world? “You killed him?” Xue Meng’s voice cracked, on the verge of breaking. “*You* killed him?”

No one answered.

“Were you reborn knowing everything? Did you know it all from the start?”

Of course there was no response—but Xue Meng’s questions flooded out of him. Many answers in this world brought no relief, only more suffering. But the questions still had to be asked. Cruel truths or tender lies—between the two, which was an act of love and which of hate?

“If you knew…why did you lie to us? Ge, how could you… How could you lie to us?”

The tyrant’s twitching face was right there before him. Nobody looked good in the throes of a poisoning; blood trickled from the corner of Taxian-jun’s mouth. He pushed himself upright, staggering to his feet, and shuffled out of the hall.

“Where are you going?” Xue Meng reached out toward that insubstantial figure. “What do—”

His hands grasped something warm. Xue Meng flinched, and the floral scent around him faded. The black-and-gold silhouette walking into the dark shattered.

“Mo Ran?!”

Mo Ran was gone. So was the illusion. Something in Xue Meng felt broken beyond repair. Illusion or dreamscape, past or present—which was real, which fake? The Space-Time Gate had merged past and present lifetimes into one. Which events were real, which Mo Ran was true, which self was his own?

Misery etched pitiful lines into his gaunt face. Even his eyes were dull and lost. When his pupils finally focused, they held Mei Hanxue’s reflection.

“Wakey-wakey.” Mei Hanxue stood in front of him with his brother at his side. He let go of his hand and flicked him on the forehead. Xue Meng winced. “It’s over.”

Xue Meng took a moment to struggle back his senses. “I’m sorry…” he gasped.

Mei Hanxue pursed his lips. “Nothing to apologize for. Fog like this is really strange. The more you have on your mind, the scarier the illusion it’ll form.”

Glassy-eyed, Xue Meng looked up at him. He still disliked talking to Mei Hanxue, but right now he was the only stable presence among so much formless shadow. “What about you?” he asked against his will. “What did you see?”

Mei Hanxue’s smile came a beat late. “A few hundred women I’ve angered in the past decade or so. Ah, what a feast for the senses, a sumptuous sight… Little old me was in quite the predicament.”

Xue Meng fell silent.

At that moment, all three turned as a colossal explosion erupted somewhere in the back halls.

Mei Hänxue’s gaze was frosty. Sword in hand, he called, “Let’s go.”

Xue Meng and Mei Hanxue followed him through the rain-swept middle hall and into the back of the building. A woman’s lithe, white-gold silhouette was racing along the ridge of the roof. When she caught sight of them, she froze and looked down. A flash of lightning illuminated her face.

“Mu Yanli?” Mei Hänxue’s tone was stern.

A sharp cry came from ahead. “Ignore them, Mu-jiejie! Run!”

Mu Yanli reluctantly leapt away. By the time Xue Meng and the others caught up, the back hall was in ruins. Broken wood and shattered tile littered the ground; fire licked at the splintered beams and devoured the silk hangings. Red tongues of flame clawed at the sky, black smoke rolling outward like the tide.

Among the wreckage, two swift white shadows clashed in violent combat. Where they went, sparks flew; their silhouettes seemed to weave through the air as fast as lightning, tearing at each other over the ruins of the palace. The howl of the wind was joined by the shriek of clanging metal. As golden light crashed against blue, an explosion sent tiles flying—

a massive tree had broken through the earth like a dragon roused. In answer, a blue tidal wave of spiritual energy surged up from the shattered rubble.

The combatants arced through the air, one standing poised atop the skyscraping tree, the other at the crest of the towering wave.

Xue Meng paled. “Shizun!” Regardless of what secrets he’d discovered, worrying about Chu Wanning was an instinct.

Mei Hänxue narrowed his eyes at the swirling maelstrom. “Shi Mingjing…”

Indeed, the one locked in combat with Chu Wanning was his one-time disciple, Shi Mingjing. Yet strangely, Shi Mingjing was enveloped not in his own weak spiritual energy, but in the ferocious power that had once belonged to Taxian-jun. What showed of his skin was covered in black curse marks, his meridians terrifyingly prominent.

Xue Meng charged toward them. “What’s going on?! Shi Mei, Shi—”

There was another *boom*, and Xue Meng was sent flying backward, outside the range of their battle. He staggered upright to see a golden barrier covered in haitang flowers blocking his way.

Chu Wanning was sickly pale. “Stay back,” he commanded.

Mei Hanxue stepped up beside Xue Meng. He studied Shi Mei’s spiritual energy flow, unnaturally strong, and furrowed his brow. “How odd. He’s using his usual water-type attacks, but the energy released belongs to someone else entirely.”

A mere few moments had passed, but Chu Wanning and Shi Mingjing had already traded a dozen more thunderous blows. Neither held anything back; the force of their spiritual energy was so suffocating the other three could hardly breathe.

Willow vines flared beneath the Beidou Immortal’s feet. In his hand was the golden sword Huaisha; the sword flashed, illuminating eyes sharper than the blade itself. He soared through the sky like a swallow, bringing Huaisha down on Shi Mingjing.

“Chu Wanning!” came Shi Mei’s twisted howl of fury. “I spared you in both lifetimes, yet this is how you repay me?!”

His fingers formed a sigil; a deep blue barrier unfolded in front of Shi Mei, taking the brunt of Chu Wanning's attack. Yet the barrier hadn't appeared out of thin air. It sprang from the scabbardless long blade locked against Huaisha—Bugui. Taxian-jun's brutal strength coursed through Shi Mei's body. Even Bugui had misidentified its owner, accepting his summons and fighting on his behalf.

Shadows flitted through Chu Wanning's eyes. "No," he said. "You killed me in both."

He withdrew his radiant golden sword. Shi Mei's barrier was already beginning to crack. Chu Wanning whirled in midair and landed a brutal kick on the largest fissure. He sprang back, then shot forward again, Huaisha extended.

Thunder roared overhead. Heavy black clouds rolled across the sky, and in that storm that threatened to tear the world apart, Huaisha slammed through Shi Mei's barrier.

Shi Mei raised Bugui to block, but he was no Mo Weiyu. He couldn't withstand Huaisha's power. The long blade fell from his hands point-first, sinking into the ground with a drawn-out scrape of metal as the golden holy weapon stabbed toward Shi Mei's ribs.

"Mngh…" Shi Mei had flinched aside just in time. The blade missed his heart, but he was too late to avoid it entirely. Blood sprayed as Huaisha pierced Shi Mei's shoulder with the sound of tearing flesh, crimson streaming back along the blade and into Chu Wanning's palm.

Shi Mei collapsed, sprawled among the rubble. Yet after only a moment, he pressed a hand over the wound and crawled back to his feet. Fury and malevolence glittered in his eyes. "Why must you try to stop me? What's the use in it?! Will the dead return to life? Will your lives be improved?! Will these worlds go back to how they were?!"

Chu Wanning fluttered down from the skies and landed lightly on his toes. He stood amidst the rubble, soaked from head to toe and bleeding from his wounds, and regarded Shi Mei with deadened eyes. He looked nothing like the usual Chu Wanning. He'd meant what he said. The Flower of Eightfold Sorrows had consumed the man he loved, so he'd died by Shi Mingjing's hand in both lifetimes. This one and the last.

"It's too late! Don't you know you could've stopped all this?!" Shi Mei howled, teeth bared. His eyes were crazed. Rain poured down around them, but it couldn't douse the fires of his hatred. "When you opened the Space-Time Gate in the previous life and went to the past, you should've killed Mo Ran—torn him to shreds and burned him until only ash remained! You could've killed him then and there!"

Chu Wanning's eyes were as cold as ice.

"Redemption? A second chance? *Ridiculous*! You wanted to save him, you didn't want to kill him—and that's how I got my hands on his newly strengthened spiritual core! It was only because of you that I could reforge Emperor Taxian-jun and bring us this far!"

Shi Mei burst out laughing. His relentless stare held all the venom of snake fangs and scorpion stingers, dripping poison. He gnashed his teeth. "Because you couldn't bear to do it. Didn't you want to stop me? If you'd resolved yourself to kill him then, that would have been the end. What room would there have been for me?!

"You're the one who doomed these worlds! So what if you're Yuheng of the Night Sky, the Beidou Immortal—what did you accomplish? Nothing! I only figured out the first forbidden technique by studying your rift in space-time—without it, how would I have managed to open the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death? You've played your part in destroying the world—"

His raucous laughter clung to him like a spiderweb, circled him like a vulture. Shi Mei collapsed, blood spilling from the corner of his mouth. The demonic markings on his body were fading, but he didn't care. He was bent on using the cruelest words he knew to condemn the man in front of him. Whatever bygone love or affection he'd had for Chu Wanning disappeared in the pouring rain. He'd underestimated Chu Wanning, or overestimated himself. He'd been arrogant, convinced he could turn Chu Wanning into his own plaything. As long as he kept him on a tight leash, there was no harm in preserving him as a pet. There was no need to end his life. But now—

"If I could do it all over again…" Cold malice shone in those peach-blossom eyes. Shi Mei's hand tightened on his bloody shoulder. "I would've killed you for sure."

The last of the curse marks disappeared from his skin. That powerful spiritual energy drained away from Shi Mei's body. He slumped backward, reduced once again to an ordinary Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast. Shi Mei panted for breath, staring at Chu Wanning through the falling rain.

He'd used the last lethal weapon he had—Divine Borrowing. It was a technique he'd used once before, in front of the reborn Mo Ran at the inn on Rainbell Isle. It wasn't much of an attack, just a magical pill made using Emperor Taxian-jun's blood. With it, he could use Mo Ran's strength for half an hour. And really, not all of Mo Ran's power—a bit less, but enough in many critical situations.

But his time had run out, and he had failed to defeat Chu Wanning. He was out of options. He knew that all too well.

Xue Meng's scalp prickled. Bewildered, he rasped, "Shizun…? Shi Mei?"

Shi Mei had fallen not far from where Xue Meng was standing. Xue Meng had spoken at no more than a murmur, but Shi Mei heard him and turned.

Their eyes met; Xue Meng's mind went blank. Shi Mei watched him for a beat, eyes glittering. A miserable smile unfurled on that impossibly beautiful face. "Young master…" he whispered.

Xue Meng flinched. Shi Mei's eyes were still those eyes he remembered; his face was still that face from his past. He was so fragile and wretched. He didn't say anything but reached out wordlessly. Xue Meng was standing right by the barrier. If he took even one step closer—no, half a step would be enough—Shi Mei could…

Bugui, stuck in the ground nearby, suddenly radiated a blinding light. Everyone stared in shock, all eyes going to that blade of a thousand battles. It flickered from crimson-red to jade-green and back over a dozen times before a powerful force burst from it.

"Watch out!" cried Mei Hanxue. He grabbed Xue Meng, who'd nearly stepped out of the barrier, and yanked him backward. They watched as Bugui broke through the earth and flew into the raging storm. It streaked like a shooting star toward the forbidden area at the rear of the mountain, leaving a trail of fleeting brilliance in its wake.

The cultivators that had marched on the mountain and engaged the horde of pawns watched it arc across the sky in shock.

"What was that?!"

"What's going on?!"

Shi Mei narrowed his eyes. He lay on the ground, watching the crimson light flickering in the back mountain. The red light filled his pupils. Curling his fingers into fists, Shi Mei closed his eyes and probed for the source.

A moment later, his eyes flew open, his face alight with mad glee. "Taxian-jun!"

Chu Wanning whirled, his face ashen.

Shi Mei started to laugh, a predatory glint in his eyes. "He survived… ha ha ha… He survived!"

Somehow, he mustered the strength to get to his feet. Before anyone could move, he'd tapped his acupoints to stop his bleeding—with a whirl of his blood-soaked robes, he leapt up to the roof and threw himself into the gardens and away.

"Shizun…" Xue Meng called weakly.

But Chu Wanning couldn't tarry. He turned to Xue Meng, then to Mei Hanxue. "Please take care of him."

He sprang into the air after Shi Mei.

Shi Mei was quick and lithe; he rivaled his teacher in skill with the qinggong lightness technique. The two of them sped along. Shi Mei couldn't shake Chu Wanning off his tail, but Chu Wanning couldn't catch him either. In the blink of an eye, they gained the back mountains.

The scene that greeted them brought them both to a screeching halt, breathless with shock.

Chapter 303:
The Other Xue Meng

AN ABYSSAL RAVINE split the ground before the Martyr's Path, left when Chu Wanning had used the Corpse Destruction technique. Rain roared down its sides and into its depths. Above the ravine, a man dressed in robes of gold-patterned black stood in the air with his back to them, the hilt of Bugui's long blade in his hand. Sensing their approach, his fingertips twitched. Slowly, he turned.

It was as if someone had buried an axe in Chu Wanning's heart. Battered by the howling wind, he stared at the man in front of him in disbelief.

Mo Ran? How could this be?!

Lightning flashed; thunder shook the skies. The pallid light illuminated Emperor Taxian-jun's blood-streaked face. Shi Mei couldn't help taking a step back at the horrific sight, but Chu Wanning was compelled closer.

Taxian-jun's face was crisscrossed with bloody slashes. Not just his face—every inch of exposed skin was marred by red and weeping wounds. He resembled a corpse some butcher had tried to dismember with a dull cleaver, his whole body torn and cracking. Only his face retained some of his original handsomeness.

Chu Wanning's lips were bloodless and pale. He stood in the pouring rain and stared at the mangled walking corpse. The corpse stared back at him, his once-bright eyes filled with bloody tears.

Taxian-jun was barely lucid. His memories and souls warred with each other—perhaps overcome by the pain, he brought a hand up to his face. Between his fingers, dark blood ran with the rain.

"Why did you have to treat me like this?" He spoke with Taxian-jun's rage and Mo-zongshi's confusion, thick lashes fluttering. Chu Wanning couldn't say a word.

"Why did you have to kill me?" he mumbled, eyes unseeing yet filled with Chu Wanning's reflection. His expression slowly metamorphosed into something softer and more helpless. "Shizun," he murmured. "Did I mess up again?"

"No…" Chu Wanning's voice was a whisper.

"Did I make you unhappy again?"

His voice crashed through Chu Wanning's head, demolishing any semblance of rationality. Was that Taxian-jun in the rain? No—*no*, that was Mo Ran.

Be it Emperor Taxian-jun, be it Mo-zongshi, both of them were Mo Ran.

Mo Ran was drenched in blood. He staggered toward Chu Wanning, his face the white of death beneath streaks of crimson, his eyes open but unfocused, dark with formless heartbreak. "How did I disappoint you this time, for you to treat me this way?"

The freezing rain seeped into Chu Wanning's bones, so cold he shivered. He watched Mo Ran come shambling toward him. Mo Ran was weeping, but all that ran from his eyes was blood.

"Please, don't whip me anymore. It hurts. Even I feel pain. No matter how slow or stupid I am—when you beat me it *hurts*… Shizun…"

Chu Wanning's shivers became violent tremors; he was so wracked by shudders he could no longer stand. He crumpled to his knees, curling in on himself beneath the furious downpour. Talons seemed to have ripped through his belly. At that moment, he was more like a corpse than Mo Ran.

"I'm sorry," Chu Wanning sobbed. "I'm so sorry…"

Your wounds were as deep as mine, but now I'm the one who's spilled your blood.

He knelt in front of Mo Ran, hunched and shaking. Mustering all the courage he had left, he looked up, but the sight of the body he'd mutilated left him crying almost too hard for words. "It's my fault…"

He didn't know where he'd gone wrong—maybe a walking corpse that still had one soul wasn't truly a corpse, so the Corpse Destruction technique hadn't worked properly. Mo Ran wasn't dead, but his mind was

gone. All the suffering, madness, bewilderment, and misery he had endured poured out of him. He was Mo Weiyu, Mo-zongshi, Taxian-jun, Ran-er. A thousand shattered pieces made up this broken man.

"Mo Ran…"

Mo Ran's eyes flickered. He came to a stop, the puddles of rainwater at his feet slowly turning red. The ground was painted in his blood. After a beat, his face twisted with cruelty, the sight terrifying on that mangled face. As if another consciousness had seized control, he began pacing in circles as he raved. "Chu Wanning! You despise this venerable one—you'd stop at nothing to kill this venerable one, isn't that right? This venerable one despises you too! I want to tear you to shreds, to gouge out your belly, to drag you to the grave with me over a hundred thousand lifetimes! You have no right to hold a grudge. *You're* the one who killed me!"

His sleeves billowed in the wind, and his eyes were wide with rage. So consumed was he by fury it seemed he'd charge forth and crush Chu Wanning's throat in the next moment.

But like a bowstring snapped at the moment of release or a sword broken mid-thrust, there was only a loud *crack*. Blue light shot into Taxian-jun's chest. His eyes went dark and his expression smoothed; he slowly straightened, standing cool and still beside the Martyr's Path.

Chu Wanning turned to see Shi Mei clutching a boulder for support. His arm was still outstretched from throwing the talisman, his peach-blossom eyes ruthless and glinting.

"That's enough reminiscing about the past." Gritting his teeth, Shi Mei shaped his fingers in a seal and stared at the mutilated Emperor Taxian-jun. "You know our priorities. If you're not dead, hurry up and finish those last thirty pawns!" He panted. "No more distractions."

In the blazing spell light, Taxian-jun's face that had held both kindness and cruelty only moments ago turned as flat as still water and cold as frost. The madness and resentment in his eyes vanished with the rest of his emotions.

Taxian-jun bowed to Shi Mei. The long blade in his hand lit up once more as he answered numbly, "Yes. Master."

He raised his hand and set down a shield spell to protect Shi Mei. Then he took to the sky like an eagle, black robes flaring behind him as he soared toward the front hall.

Yet someone stood in his way.

Chu Wanning was soaked to the bone; his heart had been crushed to a pulp. He wanted nothing more than to fall apart, to crumble into mud or ashes and be swept away in the roaring storm. But he had to stop him.

If only people's lives could be made a little easier. Wouldn't that be nice?

Mo Ran had said this to him once, long ago when he was lucid. No matter how much Chu Wanning hurt, how exhausted he was, he had to hold out to the very end.

"Huaisha," Chu Wanning rasped. "Come."

Taxian-jun stared as the familiar golden light gathered in his palm, brows drawn low.

Huaisha. The pouring rain. An endless sea of suffering.

It was just the same as that day many years ago. They'd both given everything in that fight, pouring a lifetime of training into a battle that'd split the skies and torn open the heavens. How had that past battle between master and disciple come once again, through the deluge of time, to shake the mortal world again?

Some things were simply fated to be. Just as Nangong Si was doomed to die in his prime, Ye Wangxi was forced to become a pretty young master, and Sisheng Peak was cursed to calamity—Taxian-jun and Chu Wanning were destined to cross swords in every lifetime.

Whether born from love or hate, their fate was inescapable.

"Bugui. Come."

Jade-green light illuminated Taxian-jun's eyes in the wake of that growled summons. Shi Mei had exerted the strongest possible control; there was no ripple of emotion in his eyes. They reflected Chu Wanning's lonely silhouette in the rain like a hellish mirror.

Bugui tore through the clouds, the long blade sweeping through the storm. Two figures—one black, one white—ravaged each other upon the churning winds, spiritual energy clashing. They traded blows too swift for the eye to see. The gale kicked gravel into the air, and water flew from their bodies like dust whipped up by the wind or seafoam from white-capped waves. Neither let their guard down for a moment; both fought with all their strength until they reached the Heaven-Piercing Tower.

The force of their duel shook the earth. Everyone on and around the mountain sensed it and exchanged astonished glances.

"Is that Chu Wanning?"

"Wh-why is he fighting Mo Ran? Aren't they on the same side?"

Rain beat down like the hooves of warhorses; at the top of Sisheng Peak, the golden light in Chu Wanning's hands arrowed toward Taxian-jun's chest. Before the light could strike, there was an ear-splitting *boom*—flaming crimson exploded from Taxian-jun's palms with the power of a volcanic eruption, devouring the golden light like a flow of molten rock.

Shattered tile went flying; trees and plants were yanked into the air by their roots.

"Watch out!" Jiang Xi, leading their forces against the pawns, was first to shout a warning. He raised a barrier to protect those around him, shielding them from the falling stone and towering trees. Yet even he faltered beneath the force of the onslaught—he spat out a mouthful of blood, sinking to one knee. His teeth were stained red as he yelled, "Open barriers! I can't hold it off a second time!"

Finally the cultivators with him roused themselves, summoning barriers with panicked haste. They looked up toward the Heaven-Piercing Tower in shock. Mo Weiyu and Chu Wanning… What kind of strength was that?

Before the tower, master and disciple were locked in fierce combat. Teeth gritted, Chu Wanning met Taxian-jun strike for strike. Aside from him, there was likely no one else in the world who could bear the brunt of this revenant's attacks.

But Chu Wanning could. Taxian-jun's every lunge and leap were familiar, every movement something Chu Wanning had taught him right

here at Sisheng Peak—perhaps in front of this very Heaven-Piercing Tower. He'd personally adjusted Mo Ran's posture and repeated the teaching mantras, guiding him from his beginnings as a fumbling youth to this clash of blades as equals.

This was the second ultimate duel between Chu Wanning, the Beidou Immortal, and his disciple Mo Weiyu, the Emperor Taxian-jun. The first time, Chu Wanning had come with some hope in his heart. He'd thought he could save this disciple that'd gone astray, so he'd done all he could. This time, Chu Wanning knew everything was over. Even if he won, the man he most wanted to save was lost forever.

"Stand in my way if you want to die," snarled Taxian-jun.

But Chu Wanning saw the young Mo Ran practicing with his sword. The youth's forehead was sheened with sweat; as the sun peered over the horizon, he leapt from the thin bamboo poles and executed three strikes before landing smoothly on the ground. He turned to Chu Wanning with a toothy grin, his cheeks dimpling deeply. *"Shizun, Shizun, did I do it right?"*

Flames pillared up from Taxian-jun's palms and shot toward Chu Wanning's chest. Chu Wanning dodged aside, and Taxian-jun's bloody hands slid past his lapels, missing him by a hairsbreadth.

When Mo Ran had sparred with him at the Red Lotus Pavilion, he'd used the exact same move. His palm had been smooth and well-shaped then, unmarred by injury. He'd looked so gentle as he'd turned to Chu Wanning and grabbed his hand with a smile. *"That's enough. If we keep sparring, we're never going to stop."*

The long blade shrilled, the sword hummed. Chu Wanning remembered Yuliang Village, when Mo Ran had so excitedly dragged him over to watch the opera by the riverside. The copper cymbals had crashed, and the actor's strident voice had carried over the crowd. *"My king has met his end—"* The painted faces had whirled onstage as Mo Ran watched with bated breath—but when Chu Wanning tilted his head, Mo Ran had instantly turned from the stories he'd longed to see since childhood, gracing him with a smile. *"Do you like it?"*

His eyes had been pitch-black and so very bright.

Chu Wanning had thought the show tedious; every squeaking syllable out of the actors' mouths stretched for the length of three. He hadn't understood why anyone would enjoy it—but now he wanted nothing more than to go back to that stage at Yuliang Village. When the actor spat a blaze of flame at the river, it had seemed to set the waters themselves alight.

If only that performance could have lasted a lifetime. If only—

In his moment of distraction, Huaisha was knocked from his grip.

It had happened just this way back then. After his holy sword tumbled from his hand, he'd leapt backward and summoned Tianwen. But this time, Taxian-jun was even stronger. The point of that naked black blade was leveled at his heart before he could retreat.

Taxian-jun narrowed his eyes. His vision was a gray blur; he couldn't tell whom his sword was pointed at. All he knew was that his enemy was flagging. His opponent was like someone running through a field at night, surrounded on all sides by danger and swaying reeds, relying only on hopeless desperation.

"A nuisance," he said tonelessly. He brought the blade down.

A golden folding fan scythed through the air toward Taxian-jun's face. He instantly retracted Bugui and flicked it up to block the blow. But the golden fan had been thrown with terrifying force—it knocked Taxian-jun back a step.

Three beams of blue and red light streaked down from the sky like bolts of lightning, caging Taxian-jun in.

"Who's there?!" he snarled. He couldn't move; all he could do was gnash his teeth and roar. "Show yourselves!"

In the swirling storm, three hazy figures stood atop the Heaven-Piercing Tower. They leapt down with the rain and landed lightly on the steps, their faces coming into view.

One had an irreverent cast to his features, a fur coat over his shoulders, and a pendant adorning his brow; another wore his golden hair tied back and out of his freezing-cold eyes. The man who stood at the front looked to be thirty or forty years of age. He was dressed in silver-blue armor, his eyes sharp and his expression stern. A scar crossed his left brow.

There was no arrogance in him, only a steady competence that brought Xue Zhengyong to mind.

The man raised his hand and caught the golden fan that'd come whizzing back. He looked up, his eyes touched by age.

The interlopers were the Mei brothers from the past life as well as…

Lightning crackled through the skies.

Chu Wanning stared at the man's face—so this was the other world's Xue Meng.

Chapter 304:
Their Previous Life

THE OTHER XUE MENG stood in the raging storm. He opened his mouth and closed it again, the jut of his throat bobbing as he swallowed. The first thing he managed was a courteous greeting. “The disciple Xue Meng greets Shizun.”

His voice was torn and ragged: These five words contained a decade of unspoken suffering. The instant they were out, all the pain in him seemed to rise to the back of his throat, so bitter he couldn’t form any more words.

Behind him, Mei Hanxue spoke up. “Focus, Ziming.”

The Mei brothers of this world looked much the same, save for a greater maturity in their faces. But their spiritual energy was stronger by leaps and bounds.

“I know you’re shaking, but you can’t let the flow of spiritual energy do the same. I just saw the younger version of you come into this world—if you’re defeated in front of your other self, wouldn’t that be embarrassing? Pull yourself together.”

It had been a long time since Xue Meng was that impetuous young man; he knew Mei Hanxue was right. He took a deep breath, and though loath to do it, tore his eyes from Chu Wanning to rest upon Taxian-jun.

“Who the hell are you?” Caged in the blue and red array, Taxian-jun narrowed his eyes in threat. “Are you in such a hurry to die?”

Mei Hanxue blinked. “What’s going on? He doesn’t recognize us?”

Chu Wanning had caught his breath. “His mind is gone. He doesn’t recognize anyone.”

Xue Meng couldn’t speak. If the mere sight of Chu Wanning had shaken him to his core, hearing that familiar voice—one now heard only in his dreams—brought stinging tears to his eyes. How many years had it been? He didn’t dare try to count. He was afraid he’d break down pathetically if he did.

Time had passed both very quickly and very slowly. He remembered the first year Chu Wanning had been taken captive at Sisheng Peak, his fate unknown. He'd gone to every sect begging for help. Perhaps he'd been too proud back then; hardly anyone had been moved by his plight.

Later, when the volunteer army finally gathered, he'd fervently hoped to rescue his beloved teacher from the demon's lair. But everyone had thought him selfish and reckless; all of them had eyed him with scorn. Mei Hanxue had been sent to another part of the battle away from the front lines. Xue Meng had had no one; he had gone up the mountain alone.

But what had been waiting for him atop it? An unrecognizable Sisheng Peak, a dying Emperor Taxian-jun, and the corpse of Chu Wanning, crumbling away within the pond at the Red Lotus Pavilion. It'd been almost ten years. The man he'd longed to see for a decade had become a corpse, and even that corpse had dissolved into ash in front of him. The last thing holding him up had disappeared. Xue Meng had knelt in the scattering dust and wept like a child.

He'd come too late. Too late to even touch a corner of his teacher's sleeve, too late to hear Chu Wanning call his name ever again.

Since then, things had only worsened. Taxian-jun had returned to life; Shi Mingjing had shown his true colors. They had begun the slaughter, sinking the world into hell. Everyone who'd been dear to Xue Meng was either dead or changed beyond recognition; if he unearthed the jug of wine buried beneath the osmanthus tree in his youth, was there anyone left to share it with him?

It took more strength than Xue Meng knew he had to look away from Chu Wanning after ten years of deprivation. "I'm not too late this time," he said. "Shizun, let me help you."

At this moment, Xue Meng and the Mei brothers from the other world arrived on the scene. Though they knew they might see unexpected faces upon crossing through the Space-Time Gate, running into themselves more than a decade older stunned the three young men.

"You… You?!" the younger Xue Meng yelped.

The older Xue Meng glanced at him, eyes filled with envy and grief. He chuckled softly. "Nearly forgot. So this was how I looked over ten years

ago." He considered a moment, then pronounced, "Dumb as hell."

The young Xue Meng had been just called dumb by his own self for no apparent reason. He was still trying to figure out what was going on when a bolt of Emperor Taxian-jun's blazing fire came down on his exposed back.

He pivoted and instinctively unsheathed Xuehuang to block the blow. Stumbling backward, he fought to recover his balance. He hadn't wanted to use the holy weapon, but now he raised it and charged at Taxian-jun with a roar of fury.

A sword glowing blue blocked his way. The older Mei Hänxue stepped in front of him. "*We're* here," he said, shooting Xue Meng a cutting look. "It won't fall upon you to fight."

Mei Hanxue was facing his own younger self with a smile. "It's our mess, so we'll be the ones to clean it up. You won't be needed. Mei-xianjun, you're in the prime of your youth. It'll be a terrible shame if you get buried in all this seething hate and spend the rest of your life as dully as I did."

The younger Mei Hanxue was left speechless.

The array they'd used to trap Taxian-jun shuddered. Mei Hanxue stopped teasing his younger self; he whirled and shouted, "Watch out! He's much stronger than he used to be!"

"They put a new heart inside him," said Chu Wanning.

All three of them flinched. Straining tendons stood out on the backs of Xue Meng's hands. He gritted his teeth. "We might not be able to hold out for as long as we thought—Shizun, you have to hurry back and kill Hua Binan."

Before Chu Wanning could reply, the younger Xue Meng spoke up. "Kill Hua Binan? Why Hua Binan and not this…this…" He didn't know if he should call him Mo Ran or Taxian-jun or something else.

Xue Meng glanced at his younger self. "This is a corpse puppet. He's unkillable—but if the person controlling him dies, he'll turn to ash. Also…" He paused, transferring the cage spell to one hand with difficulty. A fiery red array lit up beneath the younger Xue Meng's feet. "It's not safe here.

You're still young; you don't need to be a part of this. Go—back to the attacking army."

"No! Don't! How dare you—hey!"

Despite their protests, the younger Xue Meng and the Mei brothers were surrounded by spiritual butterflies. The spelled swarm whisked the three young men back toward the front hall of Wushan Palace.

The three brats were no sooner sent off than Xue Meng heard a loud cracking sound. Mei Hanxue went pale. "Ziming, the array's going to break!"

Xue Meng shoved all the spiritual energy he had in the direction of Emperor Taxian-jun. He shook from head to toe, straining as if holding the fraying reins of a beast trying to take the skies. "Shizun, go!"

Chu Wanning leapt into the air, his sharp brows drawn together. He looked at Xue Meng. "I'll be back soon. Stay safe."

"I should be the one saying that to Shizun." Xue Meng clenched his jaw. "Don't worry—this disciple is different now. I can hold out."

He could. He'd held out for so many years in this world; he'd grown used to surviving, until sheer endurance was the only thing that kept him going. He'd held fast through all those terrible years in the dark. Now that he'd reunited with his teacher, there was no reason for him to fail.

"All these years," sighed Chu Wanning. "You were left alone. I'm sorry…"

His voice lingered, but he was already gone. Xue Meng finally allowed his tears to fall. For an older man to cry like this was unbecoming. Though the pouring rain hid the tears streaming down his cheeks, his shaking shoulders and red-rimmed eyes were there for all to see.

Inside the array, Taxian-jun was going mad. Cracks appeared on its glowing surface like fissures snaking across the frozen surface of Heavenly Lake. Just as he threatened to break through, a bolt of red light slammed down on him, binding him again. Taxian-jun stared with feral, crimson eyes toward the spell's source.

Xue Meng held his gaze. "Give it up," he said. "I won't allow him to disappear before my eyes a second time."

He harnessed all his spiritual energy, veins protruding from his neck. His eyes were steely and resolute. “Shidi, you used to be the stronger one. But Shizun’s here today, and I don’t want to let him down. You’d best believe I’ll win!”

Mei Hänxue immediately guessed his intent. Stunned, he knitted his brows and snapped, “Ziming! What are you doing?!”

Ferocious flames burst from Xue Meng’s back with a sound like a thunderclap. He roared and flung his palms outward. The flames sped along the array toward Taxian-jun, slamming through him like a storm of arrows and tangling chains that engulfed him in an instant.

“Mngh!” Taxian-jun’s face twisted in pain. He threw his head back and groaned, his explosive spiritual energy faltering. His pitch-black eyes slowly lit on Xue Meng. Taxian-jun stared silently at him like a resentful ghost, a trickle of blackened blood leaking from his mouth. Next to his heart, on the left side of his chest, was an old scar where Xue Meng had once buried Longcheng in his flesh. As the spells Xue Meng had created pierced his body, the sharpest spiritual arrow had torn through the exact same spot, leaving a bloody hole in his flesh.

“Stop!” cried Mei Hanxue, worried and shocked. “You’ve hit the limits of your spiritual core; if you keep this up, your core will—”

“Enough!” snapped Xue Meng. His eyes were pinned on Taxian-jun, a shixiong staring at his one-time shidi, an erstwhile assassin staring at his tyrant king. These two brothers watched each other, decades of time written off in one final stroke.

Though Xue Meng’s face was pale, the impassioned light belonging to the young phoenix of the past once again shone in his eyes. “I, Xue Meng, have trained all my life for this duel.”

As those words rang out, flames licked the skies like a phoenix shooting toward the clouds. In the inferno, they could almost see a young man dressed in blue and silver armor, his ponytail fastened with a golden clasp. He was shouting for all the world to hear:

“I want to take first place at the Spiritual Mountain Competition!”

“Hmph! I’ll have a holy weapon sooner or later! Who cares?!”

"In fifty years—no! In thirty years, I'll make the name of Sisheng Peak known throughout the world!"

His eyes were as clear and unblemished as a new sprout, his voice crisp as an early peach. That young man was fearless, undaunted by fate or the heavens themselves as he proclaimed his aspirations to any who would listen.

Firelight dyed half the skies around Sisheng Peak red. Those scenes of the past crisped in the heat, burning away to ash. All was dead and gone, leaving only Xue Ziming. His eyes shone with determination. "I seek not fame or glory, only to be who I once was."

Chapter 305:
A Divine Martyr for the Demonic Path

SISHENG PEAK was engulfed in battle. The volunteer army had rushed up to the summit. The vanguard was locked in combat with Zhenlong pawns while the defensive forces set up barriers, and medics darted in and out of the fighting. Thousands of spells crossed in midair, the dark behemoth of the mountain set aglow by the sparks of war.

Even in the commotion, Xue Meng's attacks were striking, his bright flames scorching the heavens. When Chu Wanning glanced over in the whipping night wind, his heart twisted with grief. Xue Meng was already drawing energy from his spiritual core. Chu Wanning needed to complete his mission quickly, or Xue Meng would meet the same end as Nangong Si.

"Rising Dragon—come!" Holding the talisman between two fingers, Chu Wanning dabbed a drop of blood on the paper and cast it into the air. With a distant roar like the tolling of a bell, the paper Dragon of the Candle burst through the rain-laden clouds.

"Chu Wanning, why do you summon this venerable one?"

Sword-like brows drawn low, Chu Wanning commanded, "Take me to the end of the Martyr's Path—quickly."

The paper dragon's beady eyes swept over the blazing lands below. "Come on up," it said without preamble.

Dragon and rider rushed through the pelting rain toward the farthest reaches of that path paved with the bodies of the dead. From his perch in the sky, Chu Wanning could see the glowing scarlet seam between the mortal and demonic realms, pulsing like blood from an artery toward domains unknown.

The mountain's backwoods, so close to the gate to the demon realm, were suffused with demonic qi. Clouds of fiery red and pale violet drifted above them, though no rain poured from the heavens here. The great dragon swooped downward. In the instant it might have landed, it vanished back

into its talisman in a golden flash. Chu Wanning's feet touched down firmly on the Martyr's Path. He took a deep breath and looked up.

"You came?" a cool voice remarked.

Shi Mei stood at the very end of the path, the infernal gate at his back. With Xue Meng and the Mei twins keeping Taxian-jun pinned down, Shi Mei's protective barrier had vanished. He turned his lovely face to slant a glance at Chu Wanning. "I expected nothing less."

The wisps of hair framing Shi Mei's face fluttered in the wind. He shifted his gaze back to the demon gate's swirling shadows. "The Space-Time Gate's been ripped wide open, but rather than hurrying to patch it, you're fixated on stopping us from going home."

Chu Wanning didn't take the bait. "The three forbidden techniques were created by Gouchen the Exalted. In the presence of demonic qi, their strength will multiply. It's not that I wish to prevent the Butterfly-Boned clan from returning. If demonic qi floods into this world when it's connected to the demon realm, the Space-Time Gate will become an even larger rift, impossible to close."

Shi Mei was silent for a moment, then let out a mirthless laugh. "It's not so easy to fool you after all."

Chu Wanning wasted no more words. Blazing golden light uncoiled in his palm. Yet the instant Tianwen lashed out, a silhouette darted in front of Shi Mei to block the blow.

"I won't let you touch him," Mu Yanli snarled, brandishing her sword. Her eyes flashed as bright as her blade's reflection. "He's suffered enough."

"Mu-jiejie…" Shi Mei began.

Somehow, Mu Yanli had managed to assemble a crowd of hundreds of Zhenlong pawns behind her, ready to sacrifice themselves to the Martyr's Path. Alarmed, Chu Wanning darted forward to attack the horde of pawns, but Mu Yanli swiftly blocked his way.

"Step aside!" Chu Wanning thundered.

Mu Yanli scoffed. "Why should I? The cultivation realm has never cared for the lives of Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts. Why should *your* lives

have any bearing on their homecoming?" She lifted her sword and swung.

Her figure was wreathed in white-gold brilliance, terrifyingly bright. Mu Yanli held nothing back—to maximize her combat power, she'd shattered her spiritual core. She may have been generations removed, but she was still a descendant of the gods. The power unleashed from her core was, while it lasted, even greater than Taxian-jun's.

"The might of grandmasters and the righteousness of the great sects—these are all hollow," said Mu Yanli, her eyes cold and hard. "For thousands of years, you people have drunk human blood and eaten human flesh. You'll do anything in the name of achieving immortality!"

Chu Wanning dismissed Tianwen and brought up Huaisha, using all his strength to counter the overbearing spiritual energy coursing through her sword. Not a single drop of Butterfly-Boned blood ran in Mu Yanli's veins; on the contrary, she was of divine ancestry. Yet this woman was willing to stake her life to help a demonic clan return to their realm.

He and Mu Yanli flew like lissome kites, white robes and golden sleeves fluttering. Their every move sliced through the air with murderous intent. As their weapons clashed, their eyes met over a shower of sparks.

"Meddlesome prick!" Mu Yanli spat.

"Not everyone in this world…is as you say," Chu Wanning said through gritted teeth.

He had traversed an endless night to stand here, all warmth stripped from him. But he remembered Madam Rong's kindness of a meal, remembered Luo Xianxian's unwillingness to bring harm upon others, remembered the loyalty of Sisheng Peak's disciples to the principle of justice over coin, remembered Chu Xun carving out his heart to light the way for his people.

He remembered the radiant smiles of Yuliang Village's inhabitants and the dignity of Flying Flower Isle's mistress; he remembered how Nangong Si had sacrificed himself to subdue evil, remembered how Li Wuxin had brought others to safety on his sword.

He remembered Nangong Changying's serene smile as his figure faded into motes of golden light. *This world is so beautiful*, he had said. *The color of its flowers is enough; there's no need for the red of spilled blood.*

Now, amidst this unfolding calamity, their shadows seemed to appear before him, even those broken, departed, or forever lost. He remembered Ye Wangxi too. All those years ago, she'd unhesitatingly paid a fortune to save a solitary Butterfly-Boned woman at Xuanyuan Pavilion, giving her new prospects and her freedom.

"So what?" retorted Mu Yanli. "Am I supposed to forgive the sins of the entire realm on account of a few exceptions?" Hatred roughened her voice, and she struck with renewed venom. "My mother was good and kind, but because she was a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast, my monster of a father ate her alive. Was her life not a life?"

Met with Chu Wanning's silence, Mu Yanli continued, furious. "She was the only person who cared for me, who saw me as a daughter. No one else ever treated me like a human being—not my father, nor the sect elders, nor any of you cultivators. The blood of the gods runs in me, so everyone looks at me like a set of impartial scales. All of you wanted me to snuff out my own selfishness, to free my heart of desires… But why should I?!"

The blaze of power from her spiritual core had reached its zenith. Mu Yanli's figure was wreathed in the white-gold radiance of the heavens. The shattering of her core was different from that of mere mortals: Even her eyes and hair began to glow faintly gold. Each of her blows rained down with the force of a mountain's collapse.

"So heavenly heirs must be heartless and the Butterfly-Boned clan must be devoured, just because it's always been that way?"

Their blades scraped shrilly, a sharp, metallic whine. But sharper yet were Mu Yanli's eyes as she spoke, each word a barb. "Chu-zongshi. You've never looked into the history of the Butterfly-Boned clan, have you?"

Chu Wanning didn't answer.

"It's a chronicle of cannibalism… In the past, cultivators refined the Butterfly-Boned into pills to aid ascension—and now, the Butterfly-Boned are paving their way home with all of you!"

Mu Yanli raised her sword and swung it with all her might toward Chu Wanning.

"Jiuge, come!" Chu Wanning bellowed.

Huaisha vanished, and the guqin appeared. As its first notes rang out, a brilliant beam of golden light shot toward the heavens, illuminating the entirety of Sisheng Peak. An immense barrier opened up before Chu Wanning, haitang blossoms drifting over its surface. Mu Yanli's sword crashed against it.

He stood in midair, sleeves whipping in the wind as he took in Mu Yanli's hateful visage. Her hatred was not for him, but for the world's injustices—for her mother's tragic end, for her lack of self-determination, for her own trapped existence, bound by her duties.

"Let them go," she said at last. She had funneled most of her remaining spiritual energy into this final blow, yet it still wasn't enough to break Chu Wanning's barrier. A line of blood trickled from the corner of her mouth. Her throat was dry, and her sword arm was beginning to tremble. Her core was about to disintegrate completely.

Mu Yanli looked up at Chu Wanning. "Please…" she rasped softly.

In her pale golden irises, Chu Wanning saw his own reflection. He scarcely recognized himself. His face was haggard, blank, twisted, lost. Simultaneously cruel and compassionate in its emptiness.

"Let them go home… Chu-xianjun…"

His reflection vanished, along with the golden light in her eyes. Distraught, it took Chu Wanning a moment to realize why: Mu Yanli had exhausted the last of her strength. Her spiritual core had fully fractured, taking the white-golden light with it. A pair of pitch-dark eyes gazed up at Chu Wanning. Her armor was gone; she had no path forward. Never again would she be that cold and proud heir of the heavens. Her eyes now were no different from any other woman's.

On behalf of her brother, on behalf of the descendants of demons who had opposed her own race, she implored him, "Let them go, please…"

The glowing sword in her hand had gone dull. It had reached its limit in this furious battle; the moment her spiritual energy ran out, it splintered.

"I'm begging you."

Mu Yanli tumbled from the sky, white and gold robes fanning out like a lotus in bloom. Tianyin Pavilion's totem—a set of scales—glimmered in

the night, a bright symbol of justice at her waist.

The sound of heaven rings out; thou shalt not covet.

The sound of heaven lives on; thou shalt not lust.

The sound of heaven carries far; thou shalt not blaspheme.

The sound of heaven knows mercy, and thus honors thee.

She'd grown up reciting this mantra. Whether she said the words with her eyes open or closed, they were like chains snaking around her limbs. The very first words she'd learned weren't *Papa* or *Mama*, but rather the beginning of this chant—*The sound of heaven rings out*. Every day she recited it countless times, kneeling before the statues of the gods in prayer.

Thou shalt not covet… Thou shalt not lust… Thou shalt not blaspheme… The sound of heaven thus honors thee.

On the first birthday she could remember, her cold and unfeeling father had given her a box of finely crafted clay figurines, painted in vivid hues and dusted with gold. When she'd opened that brocade box, their little faces had smiled up at her. "Ah—they're beautiful!"

Her father gazed down at her coolly. "Do you like them?"

"I do!" Mu Yanli grinned up at him, her heart blooming with warmth as though a firework had gone off in her chest. "Thank you, Papa!"

That man she called *Papa* patted her on the head and took the box from her hands. Then, right in front of her, he threw it to the ground. The ceramic dolls shattered with an ear-splitting crash.

Clay figurines could not speak; their cracked eyes and mouths were still curved in broken smiles. Mu Yanli stared at them in an uncomprehending daze before bursting into shocked tears. She reached down to snatch her dolls up from the ground.

A white shoe embroidered with an emblem of measuring scales trod down on the heads of those dolls with a sickening crunch. When her father lifted his foot, only dusty fragments remained.

Just moments ago, the dolls had been laid out so neatly before her, flashing their adorable smiles. Why? Why did it have to be like this? Wasn't this her birthday present? What had she done wrong? What had she done to

anger her father so, that he'd snuff out the lives of these innocent little clay people too?

"The sound of heaven lives on; thou shalt not lust," the man intoned to his wailing daughter. "To love is to lose oneself and lose sight of justice. You are descended from the gods, the arbiter of right and wrong in the human realm. The real present I'm giving you today is a lesson: You must never get so attached to anything as to love it."

Thou shalt not covet… Thou shalt not lust…

Thou shalt not covet shalt not lust shalt not covet shalt not lust—the mantra echoed through her mind like a curse. As smoke curled up from the censer, those solemn, majestic words echoed in the prayer hall. *The sound of heaven—rings out—*

Countless nights she'd spent beneath her blankets and behind her canopies, clutching her head, lips parted around frantic, soundless screams. Yet she couldn't find a way out, couldn't find the answer…

What did it mean to have a father, to have a mother?

When she'd once reached out to embrace her birth mother, the deranged Lady Lin had stabbed her with a pair of shears. When her hands were gouged full of bloody holes, Lady Lin turned the shears on her throat…

Thou shalt not covet.

Thou shalt not covet!

Consumed by agony in the dark of night, she'd knelt alone before the statues of the gods. The words she spoke aloud honored the deities, while within her heart roiled the fervent desire to reduce these statues to powder.

Thus did she grow from a girl into a maiden, and finally into a woman. Eventually, thousands knelt behind her, chanting those words that had been carved into her bones: "The sound of heaven rings out; thou shalt not covet…"

Once, shoulders shaking in the throes of madness, she'd fantasized about hacking every last member of Tianyin Pavilion to pieces, then turning her sword on herself. Yet in this darkest moment, she seemed to hear a gentle voice in her ear, sweet and girlish, that sang to her softly, *Reeds grow*

tall, reeds grow high; past rolling hills I meet your eyes. Here on this side lies my home, over there is sea and foam.

Mu Yanli opened her eyes. Sunlight spilled onto the ground from behind the holy statues.

By then, she was already the master of Tianyin Pavilion. Startled, she ran her gaze over the fractured shadows before her. As that voice sang on, they seemed to metamorphose into gently swaying reeds, their cottony seeds floating on the wind. Within the reeds stood a woman, extending a hand to Mu Yanli with a gentle smile. *Here on this side lies my home…over there is sea and foam…*

"Mama…" Mu Yanli mumbled.

She'd called Lady Lin *Mother*, formal and proper. She'd only ever called one person *Mama*—her stepmother, the nanny who'd raised her from birth. Perhaps others could never understand why she didn't resent this woman for usurping her birth mother's position. But those people didn't know that in the entirety of her austere existence, it was only in those few years with Hua Gui that Mu Yanli had known laughter and kindness, warm embraces and tender affection. Even if she explained this, no one would believe her.

The nursery rhyme with which Hua Gui put her to bed was the only song Mu Yanli knew besides Tianyin Pavilion's mantra. The same tune that had once calmed her inner demons had transformed into a refrain that fueled her nightmares.

"Mu-jiejie!"

She seemed to hear her brother Hua Binan cry out. Never had she heard such desperation in his voice. But there was only so much she could do. She used the last wisp of her spiritual energy to cushion her landing, but not out of any sense of self-preservation. Gritting her teeth, she writhed like a maggot until she reached the end of the Martyr's Path. Before everyone's shocked gazes, she gathered her remaining strength and threw herself onto the bridge.

"I, Mu Yanli, willingly sacrifice myself to this cause, in the hope that you may return home at last."

Shi Mei pelted over, frantic—but it was too late. Mu Yanli only had time to give him a final glance. She had always been aloof and reserved; even her skin emanated a frosty gleam. But at that moment, when she looked up at her half brother born of a race inimical to her own, her smile was beatific.

"Jie—!"

Her eyes curved into crescents as she fell, face raised to the heavens. That unflappable woman looked up at the remote sky to which she'd prayed countless times. "*Shalt not covet*, my ass."

A beam of red light shot out of the bridge as her body was engulfed by the Martyr's Path's scarlet flames. She seemed to hear a sweet voice coming from behind that great portal. It was her mama, fanning her with a little gauze fan on a hot summer's day, singing softly: *"Reeds grow tall, reeds grow high; past rolling hills I meet your eyes."*

Here on this side lies my home…over there is sea and foam…

"Pavilion Master Mu!"

"Miss Mu!"

The supposed pawns on the Martyr's Path behind her suddenly burst into wails. They rushed toward Mu Yanli, kneeling by the woman who'd used her divine blood to pave the way for a demon clan. She had already turned into the thirtieth step from the end of the path, her body swallowed up by infernal flames.

Chu Wanning landed upon the ground, fingertips numb. The silhouettes of the crowd swayed before his eyes. He'd assumed these were Zhenlong pawns Mu Yanli had brought; only now did he realize it wasn't so. Their robes marked most of them as personal disciples of Tianyin Pavilion's master, but the tears that streamed down their gorgeous faces were golden.

All of them were Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts.

Under Mu Yanli's leadership, Tianyin Pavilion had taken in these surviving members of the Butterfly-Boned clan under the guise of disciples. Mu Yanli had brought them out of the murderous fray so they could go

home as soon as the path was finished. Frantic, they threw themselves to the ground where she lay.

"Murderer!" One of them whipped around and screamed at Chu Wanning, features twisted with hostility, "You're a *murderer*!"

"Why do you insist on making us your enemy? Why did you force Pavilion Master Mu to her death?!"

On each of those surpassingly beautiful faces were eyes alight with the deepest hatred. Mindless with grief, several rushed heedlessly at Chu Wanning like moths to a flame.

Chu Wanning stood in place, the world dim before his eyes. To stave off the feeble spiritual energy of these Butterfly-Boned disciples was nothing to him; he'd hardly need to lift a finger to erect a barrier they'd be powerless to bring down.

Murderer… Criminal.

Zongshi. Savior.

Chu Wanning closed his eyes. What was he doing? What could he still hope to accomplish? Mo Ran was dead, space-time was torn, and heavenly judgment was nigh. Mu Yanli had surrendered herself to the demonic cause, and Xue Meng was depleting his spiritual core to keep Taxian-jun at bay.

The blades glinting coldly before him seemed to coalesce into a massive, treacherous wall standing in his way. Just as not all the world's inhabitants were evil, not all the Butterfly-Boned were guilty. But he had to stop them from finishing their road home, even if all that remained were twenty-nine more steps, twenty-nine more lives. He couldn't allow them to leave; he couldn't allow the gate to the demon realm to open. If it did, divine punishment would descend even more swiftly. Both worlds would be annihilated before anyone could resist.

How callous would he be if he allowed such a calamity to unfold before his eyes?

He couldn't—he couldn't hesitate a moment longer, couldn't soften his heart even a fraction. Mo Ran's name had been dragged through the mud over two lifetimes, and Xue Meng was presently putting his life on the

line to buy him time. And that was to say nothing of all those who'd died unjustly, all those who made up this bloody road beneath his feet.

"Murderer!"

"You want to kill us! You want us dead!"

"You'll get what you deserve, you heartless monster!"

Though his conscience curled in on itself as if singed by flames, his heart was hard as iron. Chu Wanning's eyes snapped open. He would be the murderer—he had no other choice.

"Shi Mingjing."

Shi Mei looked at him across the surging crowd, tear tracks glistening on that face that could topple nations. His eyes were manic yet oddly empty. As the wind picked up, his sleeves fluttered. He seemed to understand that Chu Wanning had come to kill him.

Gold flashed in Chu Wanning's palm as Huaisha materialized once more. Lashing tendrils of sword qi knocked aside the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts that were attempting to block Chu Wanning's way, throwing them heavily to the ground. Chu Wanning leapt into the air, eyes cold as a frost-glazed dagger, his blade arcing toward Shi Mei.

Suddenly the Martyr's Path beneath them shook violently as great columns of scarlet light erupted from its surface. Several shot up in front of Chu Wanning, sending him reeling back.

"Look!" someone yelled. "Up ahead!"

"It's the gate to the demon realm! What's going on?"

"The bridge is getting longer—the bridge reached the gate!"

And then a final shriek of joy: "The gate's opening!"

Shi Mei looked up, astonished. Where Mu Yanli had died, a pale golden glow lit the bridge. The light ran along the very last steps and then soared toward the demon realm's gate with shocking speed.

Chu Wanning's face drained of color, while Shi Mei's expression of surprise gave way to ecstasy. The Martyr's Path was almost complete—the bridge between the human and demon realms was finally built.

A wizened voice boomed from behind the gate, its tone congratulatory: “The Martyr’s Path has received divine sacrifice. You youngsters have taken a life from the tribe of the gods and given it to my road. You have made your intentions clear.”

The voice was so loud everyone within miles of Sisheng Peak could hear it. All those engaged in battle across the mountain looked toward the backwoods.

Jiang Xi’s face had gone bloodless. He wasn’t alone—everyone understood that the gate to the demon realm was on the verge of opening.

“Heavenly retribution is nigh,” that languid voice continued. “Since you have offered up one of the divine race, His Majesty the Demon Lord will waive the last twenty-nine steps as a show of his great mercy. The gate to the demon realm shall open and allow you to return home!”

“What?!”

The mountain exploded with panicked shouts. Master Ma of Taobao Estate sat down on the ground and burst into tears. “Heavens above! What do we do?”

Others had turned gray with fright, legs shaking. “Heavenly retribution is nigh? What heavenly retribution… What does that mean?!”

Xue Meng and the Mei twins, still battling Taxian-jun, started in surprise. The instant Xue Meng’s concentration wavered, Taxian-jun threw off his bindings and leapt up. The backlash of spiritual energy nearly knocked Xue Meng off his feet; his chest constricted, and he vomited a mouthful of blood.

At the sound of retching, Taxian-jun turned back to stare at Xue Meng. Confusion flooded his scarlet eyes. Memories swirled through his mind once more as the souls within him clamored for dominance. “Xue Meng…?”

Mei Hänxue drew the longsword Shuofeng and stepped in front of his brother and Xue Meng. “Watch out,” he warned.

But Taxian-jun didn’t attack. His brows were knit tightly, his face a mask of pain. “No… What’s going on here—what is this?!”

A wordless cry tore from his throat, furious and bewildered. All composure lost, he shot off toward the dark backwoods.

Only when Taxian-jun was out of sight did Mei Hänxue let down his guard and return to the other two. “How are you doing?” he asked Xue Meng.

“Don’t worry about me; find Shizun! Tell him about the spells we set up!”

Mei Hanxue took hold of Xue Meng’s wrist and shook his head. “Your spiritual core is about to break. We have to treat you first.”

“Go!” Xue Meng roared.

“Why don’t I go ahead—you two stay here,” Mei Hanxue suggested. They couldn’t afford a delay. He pointed at Xue Meng. “Ge, help him get his energy under control. I’ll find Chu-zongshi.”

The last steps of the Martyr’s Path had materialized, linking the human and demon realms at last. The crowd of Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts trembled, their expressions rapt. None dared to step forward first; even Shi Mei was motionless.

Time seemed to come to a standstill. Perhaps only a fraction of a second passed; perhaps it was a sickeningly long wait. The gate began to vibrate with a low rumble. Fog billowed out and whipping winds rose. Heaven and earth seemed to take a great, gasping breath.

A fissure ran down the middle of the extravagantly carved gate, and dazzling scarlet light burst from the gap. Chu Wanning felt an unfamiliar energy surge, terrifyingly malevolent. Such was the power of the race that could master the three great forbidden techniques.

The demon realm lay before their eyes.

Chapter 306:
But Not Blood of My Blood

THE WORLD FLASHED DARK. Demonic energy shot forth like an arrow splitting the clouds, rushing straight toward the formless Space-Time Gate in the distance. The storm that had raged for more than ten days cleared, and the rain crashing down from the heavens vanished in the blink of an eye.

One hopeful onlooker piped up through trembling lips, "What… What's going on?"

No one replied; everyone was gazing fixedly in the direction of the Space-Time Gate. Yet that gaping black maw stretching over half the horizon remained unchanged. They waited with bated breath, hearts pounding. Nothing was happening… Still nothing…

"The rain stopped… Is that a good thing?"

"It was probably a false alarm—I think everything's okay…"

Across the crowd, breaths were exhaled, and tensed faces relaxed. Yet a moment later, the ground quaked beneath their feet.

"What was that?!"

When they looked up again, the Space-Time Gate was expanding at a dizzying rate. The dark chasm swallowed the lingering rain clouds, then ripped open across the heavens. Mouths agape, they watched as a blazing scarlet phoenix burst from the rift, its massive wings blocking out the sky as it soared overhead. Its eyes were like mountain lakes, its talons like towering peaks, each of its feathers a hundred yards long. Clouds raced across the sky and forests were torn from the earth with a flap of its wings. As it shot toward the distant Kunlun Mountain, the thick snow melted and icicles were blown to dust.

With a keening screech, the creature alighted on the mountain's summit. The cry that issued from its throat was identical to the whistle that sounded when the Space-Time Gate opened and closed.

"This is…"

Cultivators began to exclaim from the crowd: "The Primordial Phoenix!"

"That's the Primordial Phoenix!"

This legendary beast, so ancient even the oldest painted scrolls contained no depictions of it, had in the past come into the service of Gouchen the Exalted. The Primordial Phoenix possessed earth-shattering might: It could ascend to the highest heavens faster than lightning and soar farther than the light of dawn.

"The Primordial Phoenix…was the guardian of the Space-Time Gate all along?" Chu Wanning said weakly.

In fact, the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death, created by Gouchen the Exalted as one of the three great forbidden techniques, worked by opening the enclosure in the void to which the Primordial Phoenix was confined. When the caster stepped into the portal, the phoenix asked them where and when they wanted to go, then took them across space and time, into the past or the future. Yet this creature was so enormous and swift that those within the portal never caught sight of the beast—they only heard its call as they arrived at their destination.

The phoenix perched atop Kunlun Mountain, red-gold eyes swiveling as it scanned the world below. It spoke in low, grave tones, like a massive bell's toll. "You have defied the order of the mortal realm. The heavens shall render their judgment."

The beast took to the air again, nine golden tail feathers fanning out across the sky. With each flap of its wings, the peaks and hills of the mortal realm quaked and crumbled. It would have been a sight to behold, if only its coming didn't herald the apocalypse.

"Fall back!" Chu Wanning shouted.

His voice was joined by a chorus of others—the leaders and elders of nearly every sect. *Fall back, fall back.*

Seeking survival was instinctual; no one needed further persuasion. Like a swarm of ants, the cultivators fled on their swords before the colossal Primordial Phoenix.

Mei Hanxue had finally arrived at Chu Wanning's side. Brushing his windswept hair out of his eyes, he said, "Zongshi, please help them retreat to the edge of the Space-Time Gate."

Before Chu Wanning could ask why, Mei Hanxue continued, "This world's been doomed for ages. For the past eight years, the two of us and Xue Meng have tried to think of ways to minimize the destruction to come on this day. Ever since the two worlds were linked, we've been setting up a Xuanwu Armor barrier array next to the portal."

This armor was a piece of shell shed by the Xuanwu—the Ebon Tortoise, a mythic creature as ancient as the Primordial Phoenix. Xuanwu Armor, when used as the foundation for a protective barrier, could strengthen it a thousandfold. But according to legend, this armor was found only in the most remote and treacherous reaches of the East Sea. What bitter trials had this lifetime's Mei twins and Xue Meng endured to acquire such an artifact?

"Zongshi, please lead everyone to the Gate so that they can return to their original world." He paused. "This calamity originated in this world. It's only right that it ends here too."

In the distance, the Primordial Phoenix had taken flight again. With a swish of its red-gold tail, huge plumes of snow curled up from Kunlun. The beast transformed into a beam of scarlet light that shot into the distance faster than the eye could see. In an instant, rivers rushed backward, and the oceans swelled into towering walls of water. It was as though the tides had been dredged from the depths of the sea and were surging toward the earth at a murderous speed.

The crest of those great waves brushed the heavens, and then the waters descended upon the land.

Chu Wanning had begun to draw back when he realized the flood was encroaching far faster than the cultivators' could flee on their swords. In the space of a few breaths, the waters were close enough to see; in another moment, they would be at the heels of the retreating crowd. He made a quick decision. "You and Xue Meng get everyone to safety. I'll stay here and buy us some time."

Chu Wanning activated the Rising Dragon Talisman once more and soared into the sky. "Tianwen!" he cried. "Ten Thousand Coffins!"

Willow vines burst from the ground below. Chu Wanning bit open a fingertip and let a drop of blood fall. “Barricades, rise!”

The vines and shoots converged, winding and weaving into a towering thicket.

“Jiuge!”

Light flared in his palm, and Jiuge appeared atop the vines. Chu Wanning plucked at the strings, and the melody streamed into the skies and wreathed the wall of vines in brilliant gold, willow and music merging into a solid and impenetrable wall. By the time he finished, the floodwaters were upon them.

The first enormous wave ricocheted off the wall in a shower of spray. Chu Wanning tilted his head toward Mei Hanxue. “Go, quickly!”

This turn of events had taken even Mei Hanxue by surprise. Though his chest burned with anxiety, there was nothing to do but respectfully cup his hands at Chu Wanning and vanish behind the dense thicket of vines.

The army of cultivators continued to retreat as Chu Wanning poured all his strength into countering the flood. The tempestuous waters roared as they crashed against Tianwen and Jiuge’s barricade.

On the Martyr’s Path, the crack in that infernal door was slowly widening before the rapt Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts. The crimson and violet clouds of the demon realm were serene as they floated out into the mortal world’s frantic chaos.

At last, the gate was fully open.

Shi Mei, standing at the very front of the group, was the first to bathe in the pure energy of the demon race. Shivers raced down his spine, and his limbs tingled, then relaxed. Without thinking, he took a deep breath. The shriveled spiritual core within his chest swelled, reinvigorated by the wash of demonic energy. The power of the demon race was coursing through his body. So *this* was what it felt like to be strong. Finally, he understood—he knew this sensation at last. His eyes glittered, rapturous, his lovely features suffused with an atavistic glee.

His reaction was mirrored by all his fellow clan members behind him. The spiritual cores of these Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts had always been

feeble for lack of demonic energy. Now, those who had been frail so long received the strength that should've always been their due.

Eventually, the stooped figure of a man with neat hair and white-streaked whiskers appeared in the doorway. His red eyes swept across the crowd, and his puckered face scrunched in a grin. "Aiyo, I've been posted here for four thousand years. All the previous gatekeepers have been gone for ages; none of them ever saw any Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts accomplish what you lot have." He leaned heavily on his cane, looking pleased. "All right, all right. You've made the heavenly realm your enemy and emerged victorious. Very good, very good."

The old demon glanced at the mortal realm disintegrating behind them, and his smile widened to reveal stained yellow teeth. He turned to make way for the Butterfly-Boned clan members to pass. "This old man offers you a warm welcome home," he said in a quavering voice.

The waters were lapping at the sky behind him, but so what? That was the business of the mortal realm; it had nothing to do with demons.

Shi Mei glanced back at Chu Wanning, still struggling to contain the apocalyptic flood—this singular mortal who dared to strive against the heavens. Was it courage, or was it naivete? But perhaps it was precisely Chu Wanning's unique brand of naivete that had once stirred Shi Mei's heart. Even as he stood on the threshold of another world, Shi Mei found himself remembering the Yuheng Elder walking him home as a child beneath his umbrella.

At the foot of Naihe Bridge, they'd encountered a wriggling earthworm. Chu Wanning had glanced at the creature as they passed and waved his sleeve. A tendril of gold curled around the little worm and deposited it carefully back onto the grass.

"Elder, what is the purpose of this?"

"It was in the way," said Chu Wanning, face neutral.

It was, of course, a silly excuse. The young Shi Mei laughed. "The elder is very kind. But the ground gets waterlogged when it rains—won't the worm just crawl out again in a little while? Then it'll end up blocking the elder's way again."

Chu Wanning's footsteps slowed, a tiny furrow appearing on his smooth brow. "I…never thought about that." He looked down at Shi Mei. "You know quite a lot about these things."

Shi Mei offered him a shy smile. "Earthworms are often used in medicine, so I'm somewhat familiar with their behavior. The things I know aren't all that useful, really."

The two of them walked on. But although Chu Wanning was now informed about the habits of earthworms, Shi Mei found that he still moved aside every one they came across on the path. Eventually, despite his incredulous amusement, Shi Mei bent down to help.

Chu Wanning glanced at the thick books in Shi Mei's arms as he awkwardly crouched around them. "There's no need."

"But they're blocking the elder's way," Shi Mei said warmly. He turned to look at Chu Wanning through the misty rain. "This disciple will help them behave."

Chu Wanning shook his head. He stepped closer to Shi Mei and raised the paper umbrella over him. "Stop running around—you're getting wet."

The disciples' quarters weren't far, but the walk was long enough that it would be an awkward journey if they didn't speak at all. As they strode side by side, Shi Mei asked, "Elder, are you always so good?"

There was a moment of silence. Chu Wanning cast his gaze to the ground, phoenix eyes haughty. "Good? Since when?"

Shi Mei, clever as he was, had by now realized the Yuheng Elder was not so cold and indifferent as the rumors claimed. "Even when the elder knows something to be fruitless, you do it anyway."

Chu Wanning walked on without a word. Shi Mei had resigned himself to making the rest of the journey in silence when Chu Wanning finally spoke up. "Let's say you pass a beggar on the road. Whatever money you give them probably won't make a real difference to their circumstances—does that mean you shouldn't give them anything?"

It was Shi Mei's turn to go quiet.

“Let’s say you pass a spiritual beast injured by hunters. Even if you help it, it might be caught again soon after you return it to the forest. Should you ignore it and do nothing?”

Shi Mei lowered his long, soft lashes. “This disciple understands what the elder means,” he said agreeably. “Thank you for taking the time to explain.”

The child’s equanimity left Chu Wanning a bit embarrassed. He cleared his throat. “But when it comes to earthworms, they’re really just in the way, nothing more.”

Shi Mei blinked, then looked up at Chu Wanning. His expression was stern, yet the tips of his ears were faintly red. Shi Mei suddenly found him adorable. He pressed his lips together, then said in a voice like liquid silk, “The elder is so good. I’m sure you show such compassion for all living creatures.” He paused, then asked abruptly, “You know—there’s something I read today that I don’t fully understand, but I don’t have a shizun to ask. Elder, may this disciple trouble you for your insight?”

Grateful for the chance to move on from the unbearably earnest subject of saving lives, Chu Wanning nodded. “Go ahead.”

“Guyueye’s medicinal texts are extensive, and many of their formulations have stunned this disciple. The one I found most baffling was a miracle drug that fortifies the spiritual core. After taking this drug, one can —”

For some reason, Chu Wanning’s face darkened. “You want this drug?” he interrupted.

“Does the elder know the one I’m referring to?”

“Some years ago, this drug was quite popular throughout the cultivation realm. Sects large and small tried to buy it from the medicine masters.” Chu Wanning’s eyes narrowed. “Of course I know it.”

Shi Mei took in this reaction, then replied, “This disciple is not interested in acquiring the drug. But I saw that one of the ingredients is the flesh of a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast. I don’t think I fully understand… Should members of the Butterfly-Boned clan be considered humans, or beasts?”

Chu Wanning didn't hesitate for a moment. Sword-like brows drawn low, he solemnly answered this inquisitive disciple: "They're human."

He didn't say *They should be considered humans*—rather, he immediately asserted, *They're human*.

Before Shi Mei could reply, Chu Wanning glanced at the medicinal text in his arms and took it from him.

"Elder?"

"The ethics of Guyueye's medical scholarship are complex. This is unsuitable material for a new student. Tomorrow, go to the library and borrow the Tanlang Elder's writings. That would be more appropriate."

Shi Mei hung his head. "This disciple can only borrow books in the outer rooms of the library. The books deeper in… The ones deeper in all require express permission from one's teacher."

Chu Wanning stilled. This boy had joined the sect some time ago, but because his aptitude for cultivation was weak, even the laid-back Xuanji Elder refused to accept him as a disciple.

In the windblown drizzle, Chu Wanning untied a fine jade token from his waist. "Take this."

Shi Mei's eyes widened.

"If anyone asks, show them my token," Chu Wanning advised. "Be discerning with your reading material. It won't do to go down the wrong path all because you read the wrong books."

Shi Mei wanted to take the jade token politely with both hands, but he was carrying too many books. It would be too disrespectful to snatch the token one-handed. He stood frozen, a flush rising over his face and ears.

Chu Wanning got down on one knee, bringing his eyes level with the boy next to him. Lashes downcast, he fastened the token at Shi Mei's waist. His face remained impassive, just as it had been when he moved the worms blocking his way. No other elder would ever have given their personal library token to an unfamiliar disciple. It was against the rules. But Chu Wanning clearly wasn't someone who lived by the rules.

"Okay." Once the token was tied securely on Shi Mei's belt, Chu Wanning got to his feet and let his hands, lightly calloused from constantly

fixing automatons, fall to his side. “Let’s go.”

The young Shi Mei sucked in a deep breath, though he didn’t quite know why—only that he feared if he didn’t, whatever emotion had rushed into his chest would make him burst into tears. Somehow, he felt wounded. He’d never been treated fairly, whether as a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast or as a disciple with paltry spiritual energy. He hadn’t really minded before; he’d been used to it. To him, all these people amounted to nothing more than vile butchers anyway.

But now, someone had looked him in the eye and told him, *Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts are human*. Someone had stopped and given him this token, one with which teachers might not even trust their direct disciples, all so he wouldn’t go down the wrong path. His battered, hardened heart ached unbearably, and for the first time he felt aggrieved—it had been so painful to bottle up his feelings for so long.

Even if he appeared gentle and considerate, it was merely a mask he'd forged in the wake of the peril that had pursued him throughout his life. He hid behind it, using kindness as a shield, as a battlement. He appeared kinder and more biddable than anyone, but in truth, his heart was impenetrable to all. His breast was crammed full of the Butterfly-Boned clan's hatred; there was no room for anything else.

But when he got back to his room that day, as he wrote a formal request for a teacher, each stroke of his brush held a rare sincerity. When he finished, he put down the shabby bamboo brush and gazed at the pooling candle wax. Throughout his life, he'd known the desire for vengeance and the longing to return home. It felt like something new had joined those bitter emotions: a wisp of unexpected joy. Such joy might endanger him. But back then, he'd thought this bit of affection harmless, incapable of influencing his grandest ambitions.

Now, as he stood before the demon realm, Shi Mei turned back to look at the source of that affection. He still wasn't sure what it was he felt. Anger? Sorrow? Maybe it wasn't as simple as that. He couldn't name it, so he didn't know how to act upon it. Shi Mei hesitated, then said with a touch of derision, "Shizun, look. Everyone struggles against their fate for as long as they can. No matter who—whether you or I, whether men or demons—we're alike."

He spoke softly, and Chu Wanning stood too high in the sky to hear. But as the words fell from his lips, a pressure seemed to ease in Shi Mei's heart. He turned toward that infernal entrance to the demon realm. A thousand Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts followed him, walking toward the gate.

They were going home.

The old demon guarding the gate greeted Shi Mei with great decorum, having recognized him as the leader. As Shi Mei stepped over the threshold, the guard bowed deeply. "Gongzi, a moment, please."

"What is it?"

"Status in the demon realm is determined by bloodline. Gongzi, now that you're coming home, we must first check your ancestral origins."

“Aren’t all Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts descended from the maternal line of Gouchen the Exalted?” Shi Mei asked impassively. “What is there to check?”

“The line of Gouchen the Exalted has long been expunged from the registry of the demon realm. When you and your followers enter, we must examine what other bloodlines have mixed into your ancestry.”

Shi Mei frowned. He turned back to glance at Chu Wanning—still holding out alone, though who knew for how much longer—and the thousand-odd people waiting behind him. Despite his irritation with the guard’s request, Shi Mei nodded. “Quickly, then.”

The old demon waved his hand, and a scepter topped with the leering beast’s head appeared in his grip. He mouthed an incantation. A hundred ribbons of red light floated out of the beast’s mouth and wrapped around Shi Mei like a bolt of brocade.

“Bai, Cheng, Xie, Zhou…” The guard muttered aloud the surnames glimmering upon each of the ribbons.

“What’s all this?” Shi Mei asked.

“Your lineage,” the old demon answered. “The ribbon corresponding to the demon family that best matches your ancestry will wrap itself around your wrist.”

Shi Mei fell silent, dipping his head to watch the glowing bands of light.

“Qin, Fei, Ouyang, Shangguan, Zhongli, Luo, Ye, Duan, Chu…” The guard continued to recite names. Still, none of the ribbons settled. He frowned and looked up at Shi Mei’s face.

Shi Mei looked back at him, unruffled.

When their gazes met, the guard chuckled, then began muttering more quickly than before. Finally, one of the ribbons encircled Shi Mei’s wrist. He coolly raised his hand to examine it. “Is this the one? Which surname is it?”

He turned his wrist over, but before he could read the name, the ribbon withered and blackened, disintegrating into dust.

Shi Mei was silent. So, too, was the guard. He stared at Shi Mei in mute disbelief. Shi Mei raised his gaze a fraction. He had an inkling as to where this was going, but he nevertheless showed the guard a serene smile. "What's wrong?"

The demon's wizened face had gone dark. He snarled, "A descendant of the gods?"

Shi Mei paused, then let out a scornful snort. He brushed the dust off his wrist with deliberate nonchalance. "Yes, my father was indeed a descendant of the gods. But so what?" he said smoothly. "I've never raised so much as a finger to help the gods. My sole mission in life has been to help our demon clan return home. Surely you won't brand me as divine simply because a few drops of dirty blood flow through my veins? That would be far too—"

He was still speaking when a black gale whirled up around the guard. Shi Mei took an involuntary step back.

When the gale subsided, the old demon had vanished. In his place was a monstrous skeleton brandishing an equally enormous hatchet, fangs bared. He hurled the hatchet into the ground, blocking the path forward for all the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts. Then he tipped his head skyward and let out a fearsome bellow. "Gods and demons have *never* been permitted to fraternize—your blood is tainted with filth!" the skeleton roared. "The Martyr's Path will not open to you. Leave the demon realm—scram! Shut the gate!"

The two halves of the gate rumbled, drawing inexorably back toward the center. At the far end of the bridge, where it touched Sisheng Peak, there was a dull roar like the slide of an avalanche.

The completed bridge had begun to crumble.

Chapter 307:
The Twilight of the Bat

"WHAT'S GOING ON?"

The Butterfly-Boned clan members at the back of the crowd anxiously craned their necks to see what had transpired.

Chu Wanning's barricades, stout as they were, were like heaped sand before the amassed waters. Jiuge's barrier was first to splinter, water trickling through the woven willow vines. Alarmed, the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts jostled toward the front. "What happened?" they yelled. "Why won't they let us in?"

One of them looked over her shoulder and paled. "The Martyr's Path is collapsing!"

"What?!"

The clan was hemmed in on all sides. Before them, the gate to the demon realm was closing. Behind them, the bridge was falling apart. Beneath their feet was a fathomless abyss. There was nowhere for them to flee.

Panic took hold of the crowd. Shi Mei yelled over the fray, "Everyone, come forward—stay calm!"

"Hua-zongshi…"

A sound-amplifying technique brought Shi Mei's words to the ears of every last member of the crowd. "I promised—I will bring you all home."

This was the goal he'd chased over two lifetimes, his mother's most cherished wish. Now that they'd come this far, he refused to cede an inch.

"But Zongshi, how can we fight this demon guard?!"

Shi Mei turned back to look at his people, the light of the apocalypse reflected in his pale brown eyes. "We couldn't have done it in the past. But what about now?"

The frightened Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts realized with a start: The demonic qi emanating from the gate had restored the demon race's spiritual energy to their bodies.

"All of you, stand behind me. Gather together and try to slow down the disintegration of the Martyr's Path."

"What about you, Zongshi?"

Shi Mei glanced up at the hatchet-wielding skeleton. "I'm going to defeat him."

The skeleton launched himself at Shi Mei with a roar.

"Zongshi, watch out!"

Shi Mei was unfazed. Demonic qi suffused his body; never before had he felt such bountiful energy coursing through him. He stepped forward, fearless. The Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts were *supposed* to be powerful, yet because of one person's betrayal, they'd endured injustice for thousands of years.

His eyes flashed with hatred. Flames burst from his palms; he hurled them toward the skeleton.

The skeleton twisted aside, and the fireball struck the gate, scorching a black mark into it. "Traitor—you dare disobey us?!"

"How is it *my* fault what blood flows through my veins?" Shi Mei raged. "Because I share the blood of Gouchen's line, I was banished to the mortal realm, lucky to form even a feeble core. Because I share the blood of the gods, I'm turned away at your door, denied my homecoming—what have I done wrong? What have the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts done wrong? Whom have I betrayed?"

The skeleton repeated forebodingly, "Traitor, you dare disobey…"

The flow of energy into the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts was like a monk invoking the name of the Buddha, like a clay statue gilded and burnished to a shine—something formerly insubstantial given ineffable power.

Up in the sky, Chu Wanning was straining to contain the floodwaters. Nearly all the other cultivators had retreated behind the Xuanwu barrier to

the junction between the two worlds. Before the gate, Shi Mei and the demonic skeleton were locked in ferocious combat.

Everyone had to shoulder their own missions, make their own choices. No matter what strife had once been between them, no time remained for last disputes. As the final reckoning drew nigh, the same determination was etched across all their faces—*no matter how weak I may be, I refuse to stand back and do nothing*.

"Zongshi! The path has collapsed!"

"We can't hold out much longer…"

Many of the younger Butterfly-Boned began to weep in terrified despair. The whipping wind dragged the sobbing to Shi Mei's ears like it had all those years ago, when he had rammed his slight body against that ice-cold stone door in Tianyin Pavilion. When that door had opened, he saw his father, blood dripping from his mouth, and his mother, torn from limb to limb. He heard his mother crying out as she dragged her gore-drenched body along the ground. *Run!* she'd screamed at Shi Mei, her final warning tearing from her throat. *Run now!*

Run—get away from here. Run—find a place that will take us in at last. Bring everyone with you, all your persecuted kin. This is my final wish, the dream for which I've sold my body and soul and given my life. Run—please.

"How have I let down the demonic race?! *How?!*"

It was Shi Mei's last question, but he didn't expect an answer. He leapt up, darting around the enormous hatchet as it swung downward. Graceful as a kite, he touched down on the skeleton's shoulder and dropped to his knees, grabbing the monster's swiveling skull.

The surface below them swayed with growing severity as the bridge of Zhenlong pawns continued to fall away. Corpses tumbled into the yawning abyss, landing too far below to hear. Shi Mei glanced over and saw his clanspeople crowded together, pooling their newly acquired demonic energy to slow down the bridge's disintegration as much as possible. They were pure-blooded Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts, a flock of birds winging back to their nest—but what about him?

Within a lightless abyss, a bat's leathery wings beat fruitlessly.

Shi Mei's palm ignited with a chilling light. A thorny vine unfurled, scintillating with demonic energy. Shi Mei swung the vine, lashing the demon skeleton squarely in the forehead.

What exactly was a bat? A bird soaring through the heavens? Or a beast huddled in the darkness? Perhaps neither side would claim him. His blood was dirty. No matter where he went, he would be considered a traitor.

The skeleton swayed for a suspended moment, then crashed to the ground. Its bones collapsed into dust, then vanished like smoke on the wind. The gate to the demon realm was now open barely a crack. Shi Mei alighted on the ground and bounded back into the air toward the gate. He wedged his body between the two leaves of engraved stone.

He turned toward the confused, tearful Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts below him. "Why are you all just standing there?" he snapped. *"Run!"*

Run…

Run! Hua Gui's last cry seemed to cut through the darkness, just as heartrending as it'd been twenty years before. *A-Nan, run!*

Shi Mei closed his eyes. He could see the flesh of her arm torn open, the broken bones of her leg. His mother writhed and flailed in a spreading pool of blood, struggling like a felled beast. She grabbed her husband's leg, trying to give her child a chance to escape.

Run! Run now! Don't turn around! Don't come back!

The man's heel came down on her face. Blood splattered. In her last moments, she summoned all her strength to whimper, *Run…*

With a crisp *crack*, his heel crushed her throat.

Shi Mei gnashed his teeth, channeling demonic energy into his limbs. His joints strained and popped as he braced himself between the doors, forcing the portal to the demon realm to remain open. He looked below. His brow was sheened with sweat, and blood trickled from his bitten lips. He trembled violently, his bones on the verge of shattering. The inward movement of the doors had slowed, but the force behind them hadn't lessened a bit. Imperious, without mercy, they bore down on his body of flesh and blood.

One inch, two… One foot… Two feet…

His veins bulged, and his face flushed crimson. But his eyes remained fixed on the crowd streaming past beneath him. "Run…" he croaked.

Faster—as fast as you can. I said I'd bring you home. My hands are covered in blood; everyone curses my name. I trespassed against my teacher, and my friends have forsaken me. I've committed every manner of evil to forge this path.

But—I'm no traitor.

His bones were about to snap, but he strained to hold those colossal doors open. How laughable—he was like an ant trying to hold up the sky, a mayfly trying to shake a tree. A great rumble echoed in his ears. With effort, Shi Mei raised his dripping face and lifted sodden lashes to squint in the direction of the sound. He saw Chu Wanning pummeled by towering waves.

Tianwen and Jiuge's barricade had splintered. As their master tumbled out of the sky, the wall he'd toiled to maintain broke apart in seconds. A huge wave knocked Chu Wanning into the flood.

"Shizun…"

The water, now unobstructed, crashed toward the juncture between the two worlds. Waves leveled buildings and mountains, and the tide filled valleys and ravines. In the blink of an eye, the roiling waves had swallowed the earth.

The mortal realm was irrevocably changed; there was no going back.

The crush of the demon gate was overwhelming. Shi Mei could feel his joints dislocating, but he had no more spiritual energy left. He choked up a mouthful of blood and glanced downward. There were still a dozen people waiting to pass through.

He couldn't have said where he got the strength. But he let out a roar, eyes bulging, tendons standing out from his neck. He braced his hands and feet against the doors threatening to crush him with inexorable force.

"Hua-zongshi!"

The Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts who'd fled into the demon realm lingered close to the gate, crowding together and gazing up at Shi Mei.

But he couldn't see their faces clearly anymore. His vision was dim and hazy.

Eight more… Five… Three…

A wild grin, ecstatic yet spiteful, unfolded across his agonized features. Blood dripped from his lips, dyeing his teeth scarlet.

What of fate and destiny, what of gods and demons? You thought you could keep me out, you thought you could strike down my life's work—but no… There's nothing that can prevail over a heart hard as iron, a body steadfast as stone.

The very last…one…

"Run…"

Shi Mei laughed in triumph. Who said a mayfly couldn't shake a tree? As long as they steeled themselves, even ants could breach a dam. He'd done it, hadn't he?

The two halves of the gate collided with a dull *boom*. His vision filled with interlacing red and black—the red of blood, the black of night. He was a bat, trapped between them, and the last thing that reached his ears was a crisp, hair-raising *crack*.

Was it the sound of his skull shattering? Or was it an echo from his childhood, as his mother's neck snapped underfoot…

"Hua-zongshi! Zongshi!" As the gate rumbled shut, the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts began to wail from the other side, cut off from their former world.

The gate to the demon realm was splashed with bright blood, and Hua Binan's severed limbs tumbled from the seam. The next huge wave crashed down, dashing away the Martyr's Path built from thousands of corpses.

When the wave subsided, the demon gate was gone. Sisheng Peak was next to succumb to the maelstrom. The Heaven-Piercing Tower collapsed, the Red Lotus Pavilion was obliterated. What was once Loyalty Hall disappeared beneath the waves in a shower of broken tile.

Chu Wanning choked on mouthfuls of water, gasping for air. He tried fruitlessly to summon Huaisha, but his spiritual energy was depleted.

Another huge wave crested and broke, knocking the wind out of him. A piece of driftwood shoved him beneath the surface. His features contorted in desperation, but he couldn't breathe…couldn't grab anything to stay afloat…

His white robes rippled, dark hair tangling between the waves. He was sinking, sinking. Everything slowly dimmed around him. He was suffocating; he could feel his consciousness flickering.

Xue Meng and the others should have made it to the other side of the Xuanwu barrier by now. But what if anything were to go wrong after that? And what about Mo Ran?

Mo Ran…

He opened his eyes in the frigid waters. The light from the sky was so far away. A trail of fine bubbles floated from his lips. Dazed, he tilted his face upward. Perhaps because he was on the verge of drowning, a vision took shape before him. An ink-dark silhouette knifed through the depths. When the figure drew closer, he made out a familiar face—eyes so dark they gleamed purple, and the lattice of cuts and scrapes covering his features—marks from his failed attempt to destroy this corpse.

Chu Wanning squeezed his eyes shut. He had really been too, too cruel—surely this was retribution. Even his dying hallucination tormented him. *I'm sorry…* he wanted to say. His lips opened and closed, but only a stream of bubbles poured out.

Suddenly a hand reached out and grabbed him, and Chu Wanning found himself pressed firmly to a broad chest. Though not a hint of warmth lingered there, the red-hot ferocity emanating from this man threatened to boil the water around him.

"Chu Wanning."

Someone was calling his name.

"Wanning!"

He was hazily aware of another mouth pressed to his. Cool lips opened against his own, channeling a thread of spiritual energy into him.

"Bugui!"

A jade-green blur cut through the water. The man grabbed the glowing blade, which yanked them upward. Hardly a moment later, they surfaced with a loud splash.

Chu Wanning, always sensitive to the cold, was soaked to the bone and shaking. His lips were gray and bloodless as he gulped air into his burning lungs. It took him a few breaths to realize what had happened. When he did, his head jerked up. He found himself gazing into a pair of dark, dewy eyes—no longer scattered and confused, but sharp and clear.

Mo Ran was breathing heavily too, his lips parted and slightly wet. His sodden black robes were plastered to his muscular chest. He stared down at Chu Wanning without a word.

Who was this? A puppet or a living person? Taxian-jun or Mo-zongshi? Chu Wanning swallowed around a lump in his throat. He was at a loss for words; his throat bobbed soundlessly. Just as he was about to speak, a drop of seawater slid down his forehead and landed in his eyes. He squinched them shut, their corners reddening.

The man pulled him into an embrace amidst the rocking waves, pressing cool lips to the crown of his head. “This venerable one was late.”

Chu Wanning didn’t know what to say.

“Hua Binan’s bonds are broken. No one can control this venerable one anymore.” He kissed Chu Wanning’s forehead and eyelashes, still breathless from the urgency of his dive.

Taxian-jun watched Chu Wanning’s eyes slowly open again and reached up to caress his hair. He cast his gaze over the floodwaters that filled the mortal realm. “Come,” he said, his voice slow and grave. “I’ll take you back to your world.”

Chapter 308:
Pitching In to Keep the Flood Out

THE XUANWU BARRIER deployed before the Space-Time Gate was their very last line of defense—if the waves broke through here, they would flood the other world behind it.

There is an order to the mortal realm. Should the order collapse, the heavens will render their judgment. All shall return to primordial chaos.

According to the most ancient scrolls, the Space-Time Gate could not be allowed to be torn open to an unmanageable size, or both universes would be inundated by floodwaters, reducing the earth and all that walked upon it to nothingness.

The assembled cultivators were still struggling to wrap their heads around these shocking developments. Many of them knew not what to do but cry. Who could blame them? Precious few could face the apocalypse with any kind of composure. But the two Mei brothers, and the timeworn Xue Meng who'd already lived through Taxian-jun's reign, were different. They'd long anticipated this cataclysm.

"Cultivators specializing in offensive techniques and healing, cross the Space-Time Gate and return to your world," said Mei Hanxue. "Cultivators specializing in defensive techniques, step forward. Follow me to the Xuanwu barrier."

Someone piped up. "What are we doing?"

"Reinforcing it."

The cultivators looked at the barrier, which stretched from the earth all the way into the heavens, then glanced at the roiling waves bearing down on them. Their stomachs clenched in terror.

"Can…can we really keep the water out?" a lady cultivator asked, voice quavering.

Seeing that this lady cultivator had quite a pretty face, Mei Hanxue's eyes curved into roguish crescents. Perhaps everything was a game to him,

even life and death. The world was ending, and he still had it in him to tease. “Hmm, hard to say if we can or not, but we’ll die for sure if we don’t try. Does that scare you, miss?”

The lady cultivator stared at him, speechless.

Mei Hänxue walked over, face stern. “This is no time for flirting.”

“It’s exactly the time for flirting—or am I supposed to find myself a ghost bride down in hell?”

It was the first time the twins had ever appeared together before a crowd. Seeing that they were, in fact, two brothers—the elder cold as frost, the younger warm as sunshine—the lady cultivator’s jaw dropped. “You… you guys are…” she stammered, agog.

Mei Hanxue grinned and batted his lashes at her. “Don’t you think I’m the better-looking one?”

The lady cultivator’s mouth was still hanging open. “You guys…”

The man with the demeanor of an icy cave turned on his heel and strode to the edge of the Space-Time Gate, sleeves fluttering. His amplified voice reached the ears of everyone in the crowd: “Attack cultivators, step back. Defense cultivators, come forward. Quickly, please.”

Someone called out a question: “Even if we block the flood with the Xuanwu barrier, that’s only temporary, isn’t it? Surely we can’t stand here and keep the water out forever?”

“That’s right, what if the flood never subsides?”

Mei Hänxue shook his head. “Half of you will block the flood. The other half will close the Space-Time Gate.”

Thousands of cultivators fell silent. Close the Space-Time Gate? The great dome of the sky had been torn to tatters, the rift so catastrophic they could see neither its beginning nor its end. The two universes had been wholly melded together. How the hell were they supposed to close the Gate?

As if sensing their unspoken question, Mei Hänxue said, “The Sigil of the Returning Billows.”

Deep within the crowd, the young Xue Meng blinked. The name of this spell was familiar, though he couldn't quite place it. He was still pondering when the Xuanji Elder spoke up: "Isn't that…the reversal spell Yuheng invented?"

At this reminder, comprehension dawned on the members of Bitan Manor. Prior to the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town, Li Wuxin had brought a gaggle of disciples to demand an explanation from Sisheng Peak. After a series of misunderstandings, Chu Wanning had flatly pronounced that the creator of the Sigil of the Returning Billows was none other than himself.

"The Sigil of the Returning Billows can reverse a spell that's already been cast," said Mei Hänxue.

"Even such an enormous one?" someone asked incredulously.

"No single person could do it," replied Mei Hänxue. "That's why all of you will have to help."

The crowd exchanged glances. Quite a few retreated back toward the Space-Time Gate.

"I haven't got much spiritual energy; I won't be able to hold off the waves."

"Same here. I'm no good with defensive barriers at all!"

They weren't idiots—reinforcing the Xuanwu barrier was dangerous, whereas closing the rift would be easier. All of Sisheng Peak and Taxue Palace had stepped forward, along with some brave young volunteers from other sects. But a good number shrank back, crowding behind the rip in the sky.

Mei Hänxue glared at the cowards, his grim expression darkening further. "If everyone plans to hide in the back, who will protect us in the front?"

This scenario was all too common. In any all-out battle between two armies, everyone knew death was imminent if the front lines fell, but they still hoped to be stationed at the rear. They were at an impasse.

Jiang Xi's voice rang out. "I will."

Seeing their leader come forward, Guyueye's cultivators looked around, then joined him in approaching the Xuanwu barrier. Healers had the

weakest spiritual energy among the ten great sects. Guyueye stepping out was like a slap in the face to those faint-hearted bastards.

"I know a few defensive techniques. I can pitch in," said Zhen Congming from Bitan Manor. He walked to the front and took a spot at the Guyueye cultivators' side, hugging his sword in silence.

Bit by bit, their ranks swelled. And though their numbers were far from sufficient, they couldn't tarry. The first wave was swelling on the horizon.

"Quickly!" called Mei Hanxue. "Ziming, cross over the Gate and cast the Sigil of the Returning Billows. Everyone else, come up to the Xuanwu barrier with me; get ready to reinforce it." He stepped up to the enormous, translucent barrier and pressed his palms against it. "Activate!"

Soon, many more pairs of hands joined his on this last boundary between worlds. Countless streams of spiritual energy—blue, green, red—converged upon the barrier wedged between earth and sky. Gradually, the image of a snake entwined with a tortoise began to glow in the night. The creature's tail coiled on the rocky ground as it stretched its head toward the heavens. The assembled cultivators had managed to activate the seal of the Xuanwu that powered this protective barrier.

The first of the towering waves churned up by the Primordial Phoenix surged before them, mightier than a thousand galloping horses or the Yellow River roaring toward the sea. They stared at that muddy yellow crest, every muscle in their bodies strained taut.

Mei Hanxue called. "Get ready, it's close—"

And then the enormous wave was upon them, rising a thousand feet into the air. Violent spray misted their vision.

"Steady!"

The wave rivaled the legendary beasts in its fury. Even the Xuanwu barrier couldn't withstand its power: A few spots, weaker in spiritual energy, cracked. Water streamed through fissures like arrow wounds. Several of the weaker cultivators faltered under the impact; they fell to their knees, coughing up blood.

"We need more people!" Jiang Xi barked at the group behind them.

But now that they'd witnessed the force of the waves, even fewer were willing to step forward.

Behind them, Xue Meng was drawing the last strokes of the Sigil of the Returning Billows. When he struck the array in midair, bolts of lightning crackled behind it and spiderwebbed out toward the edges of the Space-Time Gate. Like the cultivators pooling their power to hold off the flood, those in the rear channeled their energy into the sigil, striving to pull the gaping hole between the two universes closed. But the rift was so vast they couldn't see its ends; no one could tell whether its borders were shrinking. They watched and waited, sick with anxiety.

Progress with the rift was slow, while those in the vanguard were quickly reaching their limits. As a second wave crashed against the barrier, more cultivators collapsed, unable to continue. The Xuanwu barrier cracked again, and water rushed over those behind it. Jiang Xi and the others quickly found their robes soaked.

"We can't go on like this," said Mei Hänxue. "The Xuanwu barrier will shatter before the Space-Time Gate is closed."

His proclamation was met with an awful silence.

The clatter of hoofbeats reached their ears. Turning, they spied a group of wandering cultivators and commoners approaching, the cultivators on swords and the commoners on horseback. The two figures in the lead came into focus. One was clad in fitted black robes, her features elegant—Ye Wangxi. The other was a middle-aged woman, slightly unsteady on her sword. She was clad in vibrantly colored finery and wore a dazzling assortment of gold ornaments in her upswept hair—this was the richest merchant of Flying Flower Isle, Third Lady Sun.

A dense crowd trailed behind them, dust billowing in their wake. They seemed to have brought all the refugees they could—men and women, young and old alike.

Ye Wangxi leapt gracefully from her sword. "We saw the commotion from miles off," she said, frowning. "We heard what happened on the way here."

Her gaze swept over the crowd and fixed upon the failing Xuanwu barrier, then swung to the cultivators in the rear who, despite having

spiritual energy to spare, had declined to help.

As long as there were heroes who were courageous despite their frailty, there too would be cowards who were fearful despite their strength. A person's soul and body weren't necessarily well-matched. Ye Wangxi ground her teeth in contempt. "What a waste of talent—you cultivators don't even have the mettle of these commoners!" Using qinggong, she soared lightly through the air and landed next to Jiang Xi, pressing her palms to the barrier.

She wasn't the only one. The wandering cultivators and even commoners who had followed her hurried forward to lend a hand, no matter how weak they were. Even the most thick-skinned of those shrinking at the back were shamed by the sight.

"I… I'll help too."

"Forget it, death is death—I'm coming too!"

"Me too, me too!"

The throng before the Xuanwu barrier continued to grow. The tortoise and snake array that had dimmed and flickered now gleamed with renewed brilliance.

The third wave slammed into them. Then the fourth. They were fighting against the heavens, battling fate itself.

"Look!" A girl's sharp shout pierced the air. "Is that the edge of the Space-Time Gate?"

Her words broke over the crowd like a thunderclap. Trembling, everyone turned to look in the direction she pointed. Sure enough, at the edge of the horizon, the far end of the rift was faintly visible. It was moving slowly but surely toward the center of the sky as the black tear in the heavens shrank.

"Hurry! Faster, faster!" someone yelled through tears. "We're doing it! It's going to close!"

It was a clear sign of hope. The eyes of those working the reversal spell shone once more with the desire to live. Everyone pressed their palms together, channeling their spiritual energy into the Sigil of the Returning Billows.

The Space-Time Gate drew together, inch by painstaking inch.

But the might of the heavens was beyond mortal measure. Although thousands joined their efforts, pouring everything they had into the protective barrier, it was still no match for the power of the gods. These humans were hardly more than ants, paltry and insignificant.

As yet another white-capped wave slammed into them, there was a brittle cracking sound. A fracture like a bolt of lightning snaked down the middle of the Xuanwu barrier. The crack stretched from the sky all the way down to the earth, beads of water seeping through all along its length.

The cultivators paled. If the barrier failed now—

The colossal *boom* of an earth-shattering explosion knocked them back. Torrents of water rushed in through the rupture, drowning the cultivators' desperate screams as they were swept off their feet.

"Ahh!"

"Help!"

The deluge poured in like a squalling tempest. The older Xue Meng glanced back at the Xuanwu barrier from the other side of the Space-Time Gate. "We have to close it faster!" he called out, muscles standing out on his jaw.

Someone was rushing toward him with a gleaming silver sword in hand. He started as he recognized his younger self. The older Xue Meng grabbed his other self by the shoulder. "Get back!" he ordered with a scowl. "You know nothing about defensive barriers!"

"I have to give this back to him," the younger Xue Meng replied through gritted teeth.

"Who?"

His younger self pointed to a sickly pale Jiang Xi, who was depleting himself to shore up the barrier without the support of his holy weapon.

"Jiang Yechen? Why do you have his sword?"

The younger Xue Meng's eyes widened. "You don't know?"

Xue Meng shook his head. "I never knew him. He died long ago in our timeline." His eyes were distant. He'd been struggling so long just to

survive. His memories of the time before war broke out—when everyone was still alive—were no longer clear.

The older Xue Meng thought for a moment, gaze fixed on Jiang Xi's green-clad figure. "Years ago, Taxian-jun demanded he hand over Guyueye's secret scrolls. The techniques in them were as powerful as they were sinister: things like refining pills from the flesh of Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts and dual-cultivation methods used to pursue eternal life."

A strange expression flitted across his younger self's face at the mention of dual cultivation. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," came the reply. There was a pause. "And then?"

"Jiang Xi refused. He said the scrolls were evil. On the day he'd become sect leader, he'd burned them all."

His younger self was silent, so Xue Meng continued. "Taxian-jun was furious. He ordered Jiang Xi to write out another copy. Jiang Xi would do no such thing—so Taxian-jun killed him." Xue Meng closed his eyes. "Jiang Yechen is a hero. I'm happy to see he's still alive in another world."

The older Xue Meng opened his eyes and glanced downward. "You didn't answer me. Why do you have his sword?"

The younger Xue Meng opened his mouth uncertainly. "I…"

It was all he managed before another hair-raising *crack* split the air. Their eyes flew to the barrier, perilously close to failing. Ye Wangxi and Mei Hanxue had both sunk to their knees. Jiang Xi remained on his feet but spat a mouthful of blood.

"Jiang…" the younger Xue Meng began. *Jiang* what? Was he still going to call him Jiang Xi? Or should he call him Jiang-zhangmen?

Leaving the name half unsaid, he pelted over and thrust Xuehuang at Jiang Xi.

When he caught sight of him, Jiang Xi's already wan complexion grew uglier. "Fuck off!" He shoved Xue Meng backward, along with his own holy weapon. "Stay by the rift and don't come looking for trouble!" He choked up more blood.

"Jiang Yechen!"

Hearing Xue Meng call him by his courtesy name, Jiang Xi coughed harder. He shot a glance over his shoulder, panting, the bright ferocity in his eyes concealing a seething storm of emotions. "Fucking hell… Who said you could call me that?" Jiang Xi snapped. "Keep my names—my given name *and* my courtesy name—out of your mouth."

Jiang Xi's teeth were scarlet with blood, and tendons bulged in his neck from the strain of maintaining the barrier against the onslaught. Nevertheless, he made sure to slap Xue Meng with the very same admonishment he'd delivered upon their very first meeting: "Insolent whelp!"

A series of deafening groans came from the barrier. Xue Meng had no time to speak or think before Xuehuang, still clutched in his hand, dragged him backward. The jagged fracture splintered, enormous chunks of the barrier breaking off at its edges. Water poured in like a river.

Everyone standing on the other side of the Space-Time Gate felt a chill race down their spine. It was over. The apocalypse was nigh—all would return to formless desolation. Some fell to their knees, abandoning the Sigil of the Returning Billows. Before heaven's judgment, they sobbed and kowtowed like the basest of servants, begging the gods for mercy. They raised their heads to the sky and screamed the unfairness of their fate, tears and snot streaming down their faces.

The world was at an end.

A beam of jade-green light speared through the sky overhead.

"Did you see that?"

"What's going on?"

The cultivators were in the most desperate of straits; even the smallest change made them tremble, to say nothing of such a dramatic development. Everyone's heads snapped up to see a man clad in black-and-gold battle armor burst out of the sky on his sword. As he drew closer, they could see he was covered in wounds, as though someone had tried to execute him via a thousand fine cuts. Despite his injuries, the vestiges of his good looks were unmistakable.

"It's… Mo…Mo Ran?"

"That monster!"

"Oh balderdash, what do you mean, monster? It's clearly Mo-zongshi!" Ma Yun of Taobao Estate crowed. Even an idiot could see Mo Ran was here to save them, not to make things worse. And—they realized as the sword drew closer—he'd even brought the Beidou Immortal Chu Wanning, who'd been missing for ages.

"Chu-zongshi!"

The cries went up immediately. It was the creator of the Sigil of the Returning Billows, the foremost zongshi in all the land. The cultivators of Taobao Estate were frantic with excitement—like their leader, they feared death more than anyone. "We're saved! We're saved!" they yelled, jumping and waving their hands.

Mo Ran rode the wind, robes rippling beneath his fitted leather armor. He dropped down before the Xuanwu barrier, landing nimbly on a wave. "Jiangui, Ten Thousand Coffins!" he bellowed.

Thousands of willow vines erupted from the earth and wrapped around all those injured and struggling under the crush of the water—among them Ye Wangxi, Third Lady Sun, and a grim-faced Jiang Xi—and whipped them backward, out of danger. Mo Ran turned and barked orders: "I need reinforcements to get their asses up here! Where are the fresh defense cultivators?" As his eyes raked over Jiang Xi, anger darkened his voice. "How did a healer zongshi end up on the front lines? Are you looking to die?"

The defense cultivators shirking their duty turned ashen with embarrassment.

A bright beam shot from Taxian-jun's palm and rippled through the barrier. "Once we've taken care of this little leak here," he growled, baring his teeth, "this venerable one will find every last one of you chickenshit bastards and personally crush your skulls."

The crowd exchanged terrified glances.

"I said, get your asses to the front!"

Maybe Taxian-jun was just that terrifying, or maybe these cultivators who so treasured their own lives had finally gotten their priorities straight.

Even the wretched remnants of Jiangdong Hall stepped forward. Almost the entire group came to stand behind Taxian-jun and raised their palms to the Xuanwu barrier.

The flickering barrier immediately began to glow with a steady light once more. With the combined strength of the crowd and the mightiest cultivator in the mortal realm, the barrier's light became so brilliant they were blinded.

A monstrous wave rushed toward them, like a waterspout sweeping up the sea. The most stout-hearted cultivators had already fallen back; their more cowardly fellows swallowed nervously, knees quaking.

"Nobody move a muscle," Taxian-jun warned. "Or this venerable one will make sure you never see another sunrise."

Chapter 309:
Mo Ran Never Left

TAXIAN-JUN'S STATEMENT was neither a joke nor a threat. He was merely stating the truth. No one dared step back. They braced themselves and poured more spiritual energy into the spell. Those who were too afraid to watch closed their eyes.

The crest of the wave was a thousand yards away, then a hundred. It rushed closer, closer still…

There was a thunderous crash as the water beat at the barrier with a sound like a million hammers striking at once. The very sun and moon seemed to tremble in the firmament. Veins protruded on the backs of Taxian-jun's well-proportioned hands as his teeth flashed in a grimace.

Behind him, Chu Wanning had reached the boundary of the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death, where the older Xue Meng was toiling to maintain the Sigil of the Returning Billows. Chu Wanning laid a hand on his disciple's shoulder. When Xue Meng turned toward him, his expression was steady. Though crow's feet creased the corners of his eyes, when he looked at Chu Wanning, his gaze was as clear as it'd been in his youth.

"Shizun."

Chu Wanning met his eyes. "I'm here."

Jiuge materialized in a jade-green flash. Chu Wanning rose on the wind, chords ringing from the qin. The margins of the Space-Time Gate shrank back from the corners of the earth with a startling alacrity.

"Everyone, retreat," Chu Wanning called to the crowd, his fingers never stilling on the strings. "Get behind me."

Chu Wanning didn't need to repeat himself. But this time, most of the cultivators—even the most terrified among them—refrained from jostling for position. Some supported their injured comrades; others carried people who'd been complete strangers moments ago. Slowly, they made their way toward the gate.

The Space-Time Gate was anchored near Kunlun Mountain. When the crowd reached the mountain path, many could walk no further. They stood watching Chu Wanning's figure atop the pristine snow crowning the peak, his sleeves fluttering as the melody flowed without cease.

Who said the point of cultivation was to live forever, to amass enough power to annihilate heaven and earth? Some people, even if their lives were eternal, would never amount to more than a lump of unfeeling stone. Others, though they only flitted through the mortal realm, left a trail of blooming flowers in their wake. Was that not an immortal before the Space-Time Gate, using his body of flesh and blood, the sublime melody from his fingertips, to save this world of red dust? That in itself was the evidence of his immortality.

Something light and airy, snow-like, drifted from the sky onto his shoulders. A shocked gasp of recognition rose from the crowd. "Huh? That's not snow…"

In the most distant reaches of the East Sea, the Flame Emperor's sacred tree had recognized a kindred spiritual energy. The flowers of the ancient haitang tree from the dawn of the universe had a unique and exquisite fragrance. Its glistening petals floated across the mortal realm like flurries of snow from the edge of the world.

The haitang petals took to the air again. Those luxuriant, pale-pink petals sent the clouds scattering as they drifted toward the edges of the Space-Time Gate like a trail of meteors, helping stitch the rift back together.

Watching the dancing flowers, many of the cultivators suddenly remembered a legend: The last time the world nearly met its end, the god Shennong had planted the Flame Emperor's sacred tree and saved the ailing mortal realm. After millennia, Fuxi had left the earth, Nüwa had sunk into eternal repose, and the Flame Emperor was lost to the ages—but his sacred tree yet remained. It was an aged, imperfect fragment, but it still had the power to hold up the heavens over the world.

Taxian-jun cast a glance at the shrinking rift, then at the people behind him. "Go. Get out of here while the Space-Time Gate's still open."

To his shock, the crowd didn't stampede toward the gate. Some declared they could keep going; some shouted they wanted to fight till the end. After all, who didn't have a drop of hero's blood in their veins? Even if

it had been drowned by time's passage and life's hardships, there might still come a day when it would strain to burst forth.

Taxian-jun barked an angry laugh. "Is it opposite day today? Are you *trying* to enrage this venerable one? Get the hell *out*!"

Only then did the stragglers begin to stream through the gate, one by one.

A quavering voice called out from the crowd. "Your Majesty… What about you?"

Taxian-jun blinked, slowly turning toward that familiar voice. A stooped old man gazed at him through the spray of water. "Liu-gong?"

Was he seeing things? There was a sorrow and compassion in the old man's eyes that Taxian-jun couldn't describe. Perhaps this was how a father would look at his son.

It was a preposterous idea. Never in a million years would the old servant dare to see the murderous Emperor Taxian-jun as a son. But at that moment, Taxian-jun remembered Old Liu had lost a son in the fighting just before he'd come into his employ. If his son hadn't died, he and Taxian-jun would probably be around the same age.

Taxian-jun closed his eyes. "My abilities are still needed here, so this venerable one will naturally be the last to leave. No need to worry."

"Your Majesty…"

"Go on." Taxian-jun looked away from the old man. "Go to the other world."

Old Liu was silent.

"Your son might still be alive there." Suddenly Taxian-jun flashed him a grin, all sharp canines and deep dimples. "Get your ass out of here, Old Liu. Find him and keep him company."

As the opening of the Space-Time Gate narrowed, the number of people supporting the Xuanwu barrier dwindled as well. With each cultivator that withdrew, Taxian-jun's contribution to the barrier increased correspondingly. As the next enormous wave began to gather on the horizon, less than a hundred people remained.

Taxian-jun narrowed his eyes. “Everyone, stop what you’re doing and go through the Space-Time Gate,” he ordered sharply.

By now, the rift in space-time was only as wide as an ordinary gate. Eyes on the oncoming wave, the remaining cultivators reluctantly stepped back. One by one, they slipped through the portal to another world, returning to the snowy slopes of Kunlun Mountain.

But this wave was faster than the ones before. Many cultivators were still attempting to cross as it slammed into the Xuanwu barrier. Taxian-jun was single-handedly supporting the spell—a monumental task, even for him. He groaned, his features contorting in pain.

The wave crashed over the barrier with the churning violence of a cyclone, as if mythical leviathans and dragons might come dancing through its spray. The earth and her mountains quaked with the impact.

“Mo-zongshi…” someone mumbled, looking back from the threshold of the Space-Time Gate.

Taxian-jun’s temper flared. “Who the fuck is Mo-zongshi?!” he roared. “Are you done yet? Get the fuck out of here!”

The poor cultivator didn’t know what he’d said to anger him. Meekly lowering his head, he stepped through the Space-Time Gate without another word. The rest of the group followed.

The rift was smaller now, only as big as a doorway. The Xuanwu barrier strained against the water’s pressure, nearing its limits. Taxian-jun glanced behind him—a dozen or so cultivators still hadn’t left. He cursed under his breath. His mangled hands never moved from the barrier’s surface, veins bulging from their backs.

It was too much to bear. He might’ve been the strongest man in the mortal realm, but he was, in the end, only one man. How could he stand in the way of primordial chaos itself? Several sharp cracking noises cut through the air.

“The barrier’s about to shatter!”

Taxian-jun stood before the colossal wall of water. Without turning, he roared, “I said get the fuck out of here!”

Black blood seeped from between his teeth. Lowering his inky lashes, he glanced down at his left foot. It was slowly disintegrating, crumbling to ash. He snorted. The sight didn't frighten him in the slightest. He was a revenant made by Shi Mei. Now that Shi Mei was dead, his body wouldn't last long; very soon, it would return to dust. If he could challenge fate one more time before it was all over, that would be enough. Except…

He looked over his shoulder. Chu Wanning's silhouette was a blur on the other side of the Space-Time Gate. The rift was still shrinking; the last handful of people were squeezing through. Beside Taxian-jun and Chu Wanning, only the past lifetime's Xue Meng and the Mei twins stood apart.

The members of Sisheng Peak started forward. "Young master!" they called out, distraught.

Xue Meng cleared his throat and pointed at the younger version of himself. "He's your young master—not me."

The younger Xue Meng stared at him, dumbstruck.

"There's no room for two tigers on one mountain. How could there be two Xue Mengs in a single universe? It would be a disaster." Xue Meng laughed, the corners of his eyes crinkling. "I never belonged to your world; I'd just feel awkward if you made me stay. You gave me the chance to fight for both these worlds one last time—I couldn't wish for anything more. But I'm tired. I've been so tired for so long. It's time for me to rest."

He turned away from the crowd and walked back through the gate, toward the Xuanwu barrier, spiderwebbed with fractures from the waves. When he reached Taxian-jun's side, he considered him with a complicated expression. His mouth opened, but in the end, he couldn't get the words out.

"Young master!"

"Young Master Xue!"

The cultivators of Sisheng Peak cried out from the other side of the Space-Time Gate to no avail. Even in that other world, his father and mother were gone. Besides, he'd never belonged in that universe anyway. He wouldn't know where to go, or what to do, if he were made to live there.

Xue Meng sighed and raised a hand to rub at the back of his neck, where the veins pulsed and throbbed. Suddenly, he broke into a grin. It was

inevitable, with age, that the world would sometimes spin before one's eyes, that one's mind would fog over with memory. But growing old had its perks too. When the world spun, it never went dark—often, he saw Xue Zhengyong's silhouette or Madam Wang's smile. Sometimes he even saw three gangly youngsters, flocking to a white-robed cultivator and calling *Shizun, Shizun*. These were all things that belonged to him alone; no one could take them away.

"Greeting old friends, half but ghosts…" Xue Meng raised his voice in song, casting the last of his cares to the wind.

Before anyone could react, he stepped through the barrier. As though throwing himself into the arms of those people he'd cherished for a lifetime, he dove into the white-capped sea.

He belonged to this world. No matter how hopeless and broken it was, he wanted to return to it. He felt hardly any pain. It was like falling into a drunken slumber.

I'd give what remains of my life to the God of Dreams, if only to call you back, cup after cup.

What a relief. He'd toiled and suffered for more than a dozen long years. Now he, Xue Ziming, was free at last.

For a moment, the crowd was silent. Sisheng Peak's disciples sank to their knees, overcome with sorrow. The group from Taxue Palace seemed to come to a realization. They turned, stricken, toward the Mei brothers.

"Da-shixiong! Come over here, please, don't stay on that side!"

"Come back with us. Both of you, please come back…"

“Aiyo, we won’t be coming back.” Mei Hanxue flashed a brilliant smile and waved at everyone on the other side of the Gate. “One Mei Hanxue is enough to bring half the cultivation realm’s beauties to ruin. Two of me in the world would be nothing but trouble. Out of kindness to the ladies, I’ll be taking my leave, my friends. Until our paths cross again.”

Mei Hänxue stood beside his brother, gazing upon the nostalgic sight of Kunlun Mountain’s white mantle of snow and the magnificent buildings of Taxue Palace through the rift. He bowed deeply to his sect leader, Ming Yuelou, who’d died years ago in his own timeline. “Today, the disciple Mei Hänxue bids his sect farewell.”

The twins looked relaxed, but everyone could tell their minds were made up. Ming Yuelou closed her eyes, her sigh floating away on the breeze.

The twins leaned against the Xuanwu barrier, watching the very last defense cultivators squeeze through the crevice that was all that was left of the Space-Time Gate. The younger brother grinned; the elder nodded. They’d discharged all their responsibilities. Not once had they left the kindness and friendship of others unrepaid; not once had they let down their world. They faced the maelstrom with an overwhelming sense of peace.

Closing their eyes, they leapt into that vast ocean. A wave crashed over them, and they vanished like plum-blossom petals on the water.

Everyone had either passed through the Space-Time Gate or cast themselves into the frigid, boundless sea. The qin’s melody abruptly came to a halt. Chu Wanning looked up as Jiuge disappeared in a flash of golden light.

He turned his back on the crowd, white robes rippling against the snow of Kunlun Mountain. Everyone watched him, unsure what he would do.

“This small rip is all that remains,” said Chu Wanning. He tilted his face slightly, the wind billowing through his soft sleeves and the black hair framing his face. “After I go, please close it up to keep this world safe.”

After a stunned silence, someone cried out from the crowd: “Zongshi!”

"Chu-zongshi!"

Xue Meng felt all the hair stand up on the back of his neck. Lurching forward, he rushed toward Chu Wanning. "Shizun! *Shizun*!"

But the snow was slippery; he stumbled and fell. A pair of glistening black eyes, like those of a tiny cub, gazed up at Chu Wanning in mounting horror. "Shizun…"

Chu Wanning looked over his shoulder at Xue Meng. His pitch-dark eyes were far away. "I'm sorry," he said at last.

Sorry for what? Xue Meng's pupils contracted to pinpricks. It felt like someone had drilled his head open and dumped ice into his skull. What was his shizun sorry for? For his relationship with Mo Ran? For keeping Xue Meng in the dark? Or was it because…

Xue Meng's throat bobbed as he swallowed hard. Was it because—

"No! Don't go!" Xue Meng fell apart, wailing as he knelt upon the pure-white snow. "Don't go! Why do you all do this… Why do all of you have to leave me behind… Why must I be the only one left?!"

Tears streamed down his begrimed, blood-spattered face, leaving pale streaks. Those piteous sobs were raw as though torn bloody from his throat, as though they rent his flesh, his heart, his lungs. "Don't abandon me… Come back! All of you, come back to me!"

He howled like a beast, slumped and prostrating in the snow, flurries drifting soundlessly around him. Those soft flakes seemed to crush him, as if he'd never stand again. "I'm begging… Please come back…"

Haven't I lost everything? My dad, my mom, my brother, my friend. Even Longcheng is shattered. So please come back. Don't take away the last thing I have. Shizun…please…

But he didn't know—he couldn't know—that Chu Wanning was already dead. In his life, his strength had led people to raise him up on a holy altar. The burdens he'd shouldered were so heavy they'd suffocated him beneath their weight. He'd watched his beloved close his eyes forever in his arms. He'd ripped his lover to pieces with his own hands. He'd been forced to draw his sword again and again against the man he'd loved and

lost. Any one of these things was enough to hollow out his heart, yet he'd suffered them all. He couldn't turn back.

I've done everything so the rest of you can live. So now, could you please let me be selfish for once? Let me die with him.

Chu Wanning strode through the Space-Time Gate. His foot left snowy Kunlun on the cusp of dawn and stepped down into that broken, drowned world. Here, heaven and earth were devoid of color. What had once been ripples of mountains and rivers was a blank expanse of water. There was no sun or moon, no dusk or dawn. Only one person remained.

White robes trailing behind him, Chu Wanning walked over to Taxian-jun and embraced him from behind. He raised elegant fingers to cover the back of Taxian-jun's mutilated hand.

Taxian-jun whipped around in shock. "Why did you—?!"

Chu Wanning laughed, phoenix eyes soft beneath his lashes. "Don't you remember what I said?"

Silence.

"Hell is too cold. I'm coming to the grave with you."

A warm body embraced an ice-cold corpse. Taxian-jun was disintegrating; his left leg was almost completely gone. Expression terribly conflicted, he pressed his lips together and turned his face away. "You're so annoying. Who said this venerable one wanted *you* here?"

But his heart felt like it would explode, welling with warmth and tenderness. He was a corpse and nothing more, but he suddenly felt like he was burning up. A moment later, Taxian-jun jerked around. "Right. Actually, there's something this venerable one should tell you."

"What is it?"

Taxian-jun looked up. He took a weary breath, then asked, resolute, "Before this venerable one tells you, will you tell me the truth?" Chu Wanning watched him, waiting for him to continue. Taxian-jun blurted, "Do you really hate this version of me? Is it only Mo-zongshi, the one who died in your arms, who you can't bear to give up?"

The rims of his eyes had gone red with humiliation. If the world hadn't been ending, he'd never have asked such a mortifying question.

Speaking the words out loud was so shameful his hands balled into fists—or tried to. He realized his left fingers were slowly starting to disintegrate as well.

A long moment passed in silence. Taxian-jun's blazing heart gradually cooled and crumbled, as if the throbbing organ in his chest had been pinched into dust. "Forget it," Taxian-jun said at last, turning away. "This venerable one already knows the answer. It's fine. At any rate, this venerable one also—"

A pair of warm hands cupped his cheeks. As Chu Wanning gazed at his destroyed features, at his face that was once handsome, now no longer, his eyes shone with more sincerity and passion than Taxian-jun had ever seen. "Are you stupid?"

Taxian-jun blinked.

"They're both you." Chu Wanning wrapped his arms around him.

The Xuanwu barrier flickered, then winked out. Darkness was all that was left in the world. A final wave rushed toward them, rearing triumphantly from the black waters. Its roar seemed to mock their human frailty—who were these mortals to think they could vie with fate?

"I told him the same thing," said Chu Wanning. He embraced his disappearing lover as the flood rushed toward them. On the edge of the apocalypse, his eyes were serene. "It doesn't matter if it's Mo-zongshi or Taxian-jun. You're both you."

Taxian-jun's arm had eroded completely now; his chest began to disintegrate. Black eyes met black eyes.

"I'll always belong to you," said Chu Wanning. "No regrets. Ever."

Taxian-jun stiffened. He squeezed his eyes shut, wetness gathering beneath his long lashes. At long last, he dropped his ice-cold mask, his features slowly relaxing. He wrapped his remaining arm around Chu Wanning, pressing his beloved to his chest. Leaning down, he kissed Chu Wanning's hair, then nuzzled his cheek against Chu Wanning's forehead. "You're right." Taxian-jun sighed. "I really am stupid. Wanning, I'm sorry," he muttered.

All those years of entangled love and hatred, those lifetimes of debts and grudges, fell away with a single sigh. Taxian-jun's voice was a murmur at his ear, mellow and slow and filled with a rare tranquility. "All right, there isn't much time left. I have to tell you a secret."

"What secret?"

Taxian-jun lowered his lashes. "It's about Mo-zongshi."

Chu Wanning's eyes flew wide.

"Actually, I could tell from the moment his heart fused with mine." Taxian-jun hesitated. "Mo-zongshi's souls are inside me."

Chu Wanning froze, then his head whipped up. He stared at Taxian-jun's smiling face in disbelief.

"His fragmented souls…have been in my body all along. But I was too stubborn—even if I'm just a corpse and a wisp of cognizance soul, I wanted to be in charge. I wasn't willing to let his souls merge with mine. But seeing as it's come to this, it would be unfair if I was the only one who got to tell you how I feel."

Chu Wanning looked at him in stunned silence.

"Wanning…" Taxian-jun closed his eyes. His faint smile subsided and turned solemn. "Don't be sad. He's been here all along."

Beneath Chu Wanning's astonished stare, Taxian-jun opened his eyes again. They were the exact same pair of eyes, yet somehow, they no longer seemed so dark they gleamed purple. Instead, they were clear and gentle.

"Mo Ran?!"

Another wave crashed down on the Xuanwu barrier, which finally splintered completely. In the rolling surf, Mo Ran didn't say a word. He gathered Chu Wanning tightly into his arms, plunging with him into the deluge.

As translucent bubbles shimmied up through the green sea, Mo Ran opened his eyes, filled with affection as deep as the fathomless waters. His lips opened and closed as he mouthed soundlessly to Chu Wanning: *Shizun, don't worry. It's me. I've been with you all along. And I won't be leaving. So…go back, okay? Don't stay here. Trust me, I'll be fine. I'll do everything in my power to see you again, to be by your side.*

I'll be waiting for you in another world.

At last, he mouthed the incantation to summon Jiangui. The vine wrapped around Chu Wanning, head to toe, and carried him toward the last tiny gap in the Space-Time Gate.

"Mo Ran… Mo Ran! What do you mean? You asshole! What do you mean?!"

Mo Ran bobbed in the water, smiling peacefully. Even his face had started to disintegrate along with his ruined body. Once, those features had been animated by madness and sweetness, sincerity and savagery alike. Now, his smile crumbled, vanishing bit by bit, leaving the world forever.

Go back, Wanning. You have to believe me. I'll be fine. I'll be by your side, always—until the end of time.

Chapter 310:
The Very Last Card

THERE WAS light.

When Mo Ran opened his eyes, he found himself lying beneath mulberry-colored clouds. He blinked a few times, turning his head experimentally, then sat up. It wasn't the sky above him after all—rather, he'd awoken in a palace made entirely of amethyst. It was so enormous, each brick the size of a carriage, that he'd mistaken the far-off ceiling for clouds.

A tall man stood a little distance away, looking out a window. He wore a robe made of some material Mo Ran didn't recognize. His feet were bare, and he idly swirled an amber liquid in a cup fashioned from luminous crystal. Beyond the window was a tree lush with scarlet blossoms, their pistils dusted with silver.

These strange robes and stranger flowers weren't of the mortal realm. Mo Ran was certain no such amethyst palace existed in the world of the living.

"Where am I?" he asked.

The man's fingers twitched, and he turned a fraction toward Mo Ran. His face was backlit by the brightness of the window, difficult to see.

"You certainly are calm, my hero."

Mo Ran blinked.

The man drained his cup, then placed it on the windowsill and walked toward Mo Ran.

Now Mo Ran got a better look at his face. This man bore some resemblance to Gouchen the Exalted—his lips were very thin, and a blood-red mark shaped like a spider crouched under one eye.

"I'm the second lord of the demon realm." The man spoke slowly, though he had an impatient air about him. He watched Mo Ran's face, scrutinizing his reaction. "You are in my palace."

Mo Ran took a moment to answer. “If you didn’t say so, I would’ve assumed you were Lord Yanluo,” he said eventually.

The man chuckled. “You were so sure you died?”

“No,” said Mo Ran, meeting his gaze. “It didn’t feel like I was dead. But it also didn’t feel like I was still alive.”

The Demon Lord’s grin widened. “That’s correct.”

He reached out a hand gloved in black dragonskin. His fingertip passed through Mo Ran’s chest without any resistance; Mo Ran felt no pain. “Indeed, you are not alive,” said the Demon Lord. “You’re merely a bundle of gathered souls.”

Mo Ran didn’t respond.

“My ancestors decreed the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts would never return to the demon realm unless they defied the gods and learned Fuxi’s forbidden techniques,” the Demon Lord remarked languidly. “From the Zhenlong Chess Formation to the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death, you’ve mastered them all, my hero.”

“But I never wanted to,” Mo Ran said glumly. “That was Hua Binan —”

“*He* was nothing more than a godforsaken half-breed mutt.” The Demon Lord’s eyes flashed with contempt. “He promised never to harm his own kin. But he broke that promise.”

“Do you mean Song Qiutong?”

“No,” replied the Demon Lord. Mo Ran’s reflection was crisp in his glittering ruby eyes. He reached out, fingers ghosting over Mo Ran’s incorporeal cheek. “You know whom I mean.”

When Mo Ran said nothing, the Demon Lord continued. “You knew it from the moment the gate to the demon realm opened.” His gaze was sharp as a finely honed knife. “Otherwise you wouldn’t have said all that to your little cultivator. In your heart, you already know the truth.”

Mo Ran lowered his lashes in silence.

The Demon Lord slowly straightened. His tall figure cast an oddly dense shadow on the floor. “Mo Weiyu, there’s a special type of Butterfly-

Boned Beauty Feast. They don't cry golden tears, nor do they possess any demonic aura. If they aren't aware of their ancestry, even the spirit of Mount Huang wouldn't recognize them despite the phoenix's pact with the Butterfly-Boned clan. Many die without any knowledge of their true heritage."

"So what?"

The Demon Lord laughed. "So what? These people can command the potent spiritual power of the ancient demon race. Like the Jade-Hearted Lord, Song Xingyi, from centuries ago."

A rich purple light sparked at his fingertips. When he pointed at Mo Ran, the glow floated into Mo Ran's chest. A powerful energy surged through him.

The Demon Lord smiled. "Behold—you can absorb the energy of my race."

Mo Ran didn't respond.

"I was speaking of you," said the Demon Lord. "You are a special Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast, just like Song Xingyi. You simply had no idea, and neither did Hua Binan."

At this, Mo Ran looked up.

Clasping his hands behind his back, the Demon Lord returned his gaze to the falling petals outside. "It's a true pity. He vowed never to harm any of his clansmen, to protect all the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts he could. Yet you endured a lifetime of his abuse."

Mo Ran rose to his feet. He wasn't in the mood to listen to this drivel. So what if he'd been abused or exploited? That was all in the past. There was only one thing he cared about now. "Can I go back?"

"Back where?" The Demon Lord turned to pin him with a stare. "The mortal realm?"

"Yeah. The mortal realm."

"What's so appealing about the mortal realm? A lot of silly ants. You have talent and personality, and you're a member of my race," the Demon Lord said matter-of-factly. "It's precisely because you're a demon that I was able to collect your souls and summon you to this palace. Remain here and

you'll live ten thousand years. The abilities you've demonstrated will serve the demon race well."

Mo Ran had to laugh. "Sorry, but I've only ever had other people serving me—I've never served anyone else."

The Demon Lord's unsmiling scarlet eyes fixed on him in silent reproof.

"Well, I suppose there's one exception," Mo Ran amended. "I'm willing to serve him."

A snort. "You'll serve a hunk of wood?"

"He is *not* a hunk of wood."

"I was being polite when I called him your little cultivator." The Demon Lord rolled his eyes. "He's no god—just a stupid seedling planted by Shennong." Seeing Mo Ran's expression grow thunderous, the Demon Lord tactfully left it at that. He turned to face Mo Ran, leaning his narrow waist against the windowsill. "Are you dense or something?" Without waiting for a response, he continued more seriously, "You have to understand, though—if you really intend to go back, you will not receive any of the demon race's benefits. You'll live a few decades, a century at most."

At this, the tension finally bled out of Mo Ran's shoulders. He laughed. "Really? That long?"

The Demon Lord stared.

"In the mortal realm, that's practically forever."

"Humans are no more than ants." The Demon Lord seemed both baffled and annoyed. "What can they accomplish in a few decades, or even a century? You ripped open the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death and mastered the Zhenlong Chess Formation. Old Fuxi's probably throwing a fit up in heaven right now. Yet with all your gifts, you'd rather wallow in the mud like a pig?" The longer he spoke, the angrier the Demon Lord became. "Idiot."

Mo Ran's lowered lashes were trembling. The Demon Lord first thought it was from fury, but he soon realized Mo Ran was holding back laughter. He was fully speechless.

At last, Mo Ran looked up. “How’d you know?” he asked, grinning brightly. “In the mortal realm, people are always calling me an idiot.”

The Demon Lord pressed his fingers to his brow as if battling a headache. He muttered dolefully, “I can’t believe such an embarrassing demon exists…”

“I’ve never thought of myself as a demon,” said Mo Ran. “The first time the idea even occurred to me was when the gate opened.”

The Demon Lord glared at him.

Mo Ran’s smile faded. He looked at the Demon Lord solemnly. “At any rate, I have to thank you for protecting my souls.”

“I have an eye for talent.”

Mo Ran shook his head. There was nothing more to say. Those eyes that had stirred the hearts of so many now looked up at the Demon Lord, frank and sincere. “I’m sorry,” he said. “But I have to go back to the mortal realm.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence. “Why?” the Demon Lord asked stiffly. “Give me a reason.”

“Because I told him I would,” Mo Ran replied. “I promised him I’d find my way back to his side.”

The snow had ceased to fall at Kunlun Taxue Palace, and the rift in space-time had stitched itself closed. The floodwaters and destruction of the other world might as well have been an absurd nightmare. A rosy sunrise glimmered through the clouds, bathing the world in quiet majesty.

“Chu-zongshi!”

“Zongshi! Zongshi!”

Chu Wanning’s awareness slowly returned. Someone seemed to be calling out to him. He opened his eyes. At first, there was only emptiness—all the dust and smoke of two lifetimes seemed to have settled. Was he back at Sisheng Peak, awakened by some noisy disciples on a winter afternoon? Or was this the cold, austere Wushan Palace, with Liu-gong heaving a sigh at his bedside, calling him back to the world of the living?

His vision slowly gained focus. He glanced at the cultivators clustered around him. The snow was fresh, and night was lifting around him, dawn's light edging the clouds in pinkish hues. Chu Wanning's eyelids drifted half closed. "Mo Ran…" he mumbled hoarsely.

Perhaps his love for that man was rooted too deeply in his heart. As if answering his longing, several beams of warm gold light shot from the thin seam where the Space-Time Gate had been. They streaked across the blushing sky and soared into the distance.

What was that?!

Chu Wanning's eyes flew open. Deaf to the calls of those around him, he stared after those beams of light. What could they be? His extinguished hopes, reignited by the strange sight, flared back to life. He struggled to his feet, ignoring everyone's attempts to help. Without a word, he stumbled in the direction of those golden lights.

Several worried voices called after him. "Chu-zongshi…"

Everyone knew now: Mo Weiyu wasn't the criminal he'd been made out to be. Yet the cost of this knowledge had been too high. Even if his name was cleared after his death, what difference would it make?

But Mo Ran had never cared what others thought of him. He knew better than anyone whether he was innocent or guilty, insane or foolish. In this, Chu Wanning was the same. They only wanted to live without regrets, no more.

"Shizun!" Xue Meng started after him, but he'd only taken a few steps through the snow when he heard a commotion behind him.

"Sect Leader!" one of Guyueye's disciples was shouting frantically. "Sect Leader, what's wrong?"

Xue Meng whipped around. Shoving his way through the crowd, he saw that Jiang Xi had collapsed on the bright snow, blood pooling beneath his body.

"What's going on?" a Guyueye elder bellowed. "Wasn't he fine just a moment ago? How did this happen?"

A disciple pointed fearfully at a grisly wound on Jiang Xi's abdomen. "I think… I think the sect leader was stabbed by something in the flood. But

he didn't want to distract anyone, so he never said anything…"

A coppery scent hung in the air. Dawn was breaking over a world that had been saved. In this universe where peace had been secured, Jiang Xi had finally collapsed from his injuries.

"Quick—healers!"

"What're you standing there for?! Save him!"

Stricken, Xue Meng's steps faltered. He was still holding Xuehuang—Jiang Xi's sword, which Jiang Xi had forced on him. He glanced over his shoulder, where Chu Wanning was retreating into the distance.

Before he could take a step in either direction, his legs seemed to give out. He sank to his knees, sobbing in the snow. Where in this vast world could he still take refuge from the turbulence of love and hatred, of passion and vengeance? As he once again raised his head in the mortal realm, he discovered that no one remained by his side. Those proud and carefree days of his youth had vanished like dust in the wake of a galloping horse, never to return.

On that winding, snow-covered mountain path, Chu Wanning watched those beams of red light fly toward the horizon, disappearing into the distant mountains.

Trust me, I'll do everything in my power to see you again.

I'll be waiting for you in another world.

He shuddered. Chu Wanning didn't dare let the idea settle in his mind. He refused to indulge such wild optimism without seeing the truth with his own eyes.

The sun's rays pierced the abyssal darkness, casting off yesterday's frigid night. Countless golden streamers seemed to fall upon the jagged, meandering mountain trail. Dawn bathed everyone in its warm red glow, ushering in days of peace now that the calamity had passed.

Chu Wanning gazed toward the east and brandished a talisman between his fingers. Brilliant gold flared in his hand. "Rising Dragon—come!"

With a shrill gust of wind, his Dragon of the Candle burst from the air. The beast's massive form uncoiled in the snow with a sound like a

tolling bell.

"Has the crisis been averted?" it asked brightly, apparently pleased to find itself in a more peaceful world.

"Mn."

"The fighting's over?"

"Mn."

The dragon leapt into the air in delight. After completing a loop, it reluctantly settled down again, addressing Chu Wanning in its usual waggish tone. "Chu Wanning, why are you always alone?"

Chu Wanning stood calmly in the chill wind, snowflakes clinging to his long lashes. Mo Ran's last words to him were still ringing in his ears. His heart pounded like a drum. After a long moment, he looked at the curled-up dragon silhouetted by the dawn light. "I want you to take me somewhere."

"Where?"

Chu Wanning leapt onto the dragon's back, and the enormous creature took to the air. Chu Wanning looked down at the snowy expanse, lands silvered with frost spread below his feet. The rising sun climbed higher, inch by inch, growing ever brighter. At last, in the full-bodied morning light, he said to the dragon, "Nanping Mountain. I need to see him."

The dragon's whiskers twitched. For once, it suppressed the urge to tease Chu Wanning. The creature already knew where its master wanted to go and whom he wanted to see. It let out a quavering roar as they soared toward the heavens, and Chu Wanning turned to take a final glance at the majestic landscape below.

Voluminous clouds drifted through the endless sky. He was leaving snowcapped Kunlun behind to chase after those red-gold beams, flying toward the distant ends of the jianghu where that gentle rain would first fall. Mo Ran had promised he'd come back, so he believed him. He was going to the place they'd last parted ways to meet once more.

"Do you think…those gold lights were his souls returning to this world?"

Weaving through clouds, the dragon muttered, “How am I supposed to know?”

“Do you think his souls will go back into his body?”

“I guess…?” the dragon hazarded.

Very soon, they arrived at Nanping Mountain. Chu Wanning urged the dragon down just outside a bamboo grove deep in the mountain forest. He moved without doubt or hesitation, seemingly certain as to where those lights had gone.

“Is he here?” asked the dragon.

Chu Wanning didn’t answer. He jumped down from the dragon’s back.

“I left Mo Ran’s body safeguarded here.” Chu Wanning’s fingers trembled uncontrollably. It felt as if a massive boulder on his chest was stopping his breath. “If it’s possible for his souls to return, they’ll…”

He wanted to say *They’ll definitely be here*, but he found himself unable to finish the thought.

What if they weren’t?

He wanted to leave himself room for hope. He didn’t want to speak with too much certainty.

The paper dragon had never been the most tactful. “But what if he didn’t come back?” it said, shaking its whiskered head. “What if those beams of light scattered before they made it here? What if—”

Chu Wanning whirled. He glared at the dragon with red-rimmed eyes. “Then I’ll burn you as a burial offering to him.”

“Aiya, so scary.” With a final grumble, the creature’s massive bulk vanished in a flash of gold as it shrank itself back to the size of a palm. Perching on Chu Wanning’s shoulder, the tiny dragon nudged its master’s cheek with its head. As if the dragon wasn’t familiar with Chu Wanning’s personality—it knew he would never really set it on fire.

The dragon exhaled wearily. “By the look on your face, it seems like you’d be more interested in being the burial offering yourself.” It scratched at the back of Chu Wanning’s head with its tail.

"What are you doing?"

"I was worried you'd pass out if I didn't keep you awake." The dragon sighed and bopped Chu Wanning with its tail. "You look terrible."

Chu Wanning only glared.

"That's it—you look like someone about to gamble his life's savings on one final wager."

No retort came to Chu Wanning's lips; he merely closed his eyes. The little dragon wasn't wrong. This concerned his disciple of two lifetimes, his lover across two universes. The idiot who'd twice thrown himself bodily into the abyss so Chu Wanning could remain pristine.

This concerned the rest of his life.

The snow crunched underfoot as he slowly walked the path. A small, run-down cottage rose up before him. Chu Wanning stood before the door, fingertips trembling. Only a single panel of flimsy, weathered wood separated him from the courtyard in front of him, yet somehow, it seemed heavier than the gate to the demon realm.

Chu Wanning swallowed, blood thundering in his ears. He stood rooted to the spot like a block of wood. Several times, he lifted his hand, only to drop it before his fingers touched the door.

"Aiya," the little dragon wailed. "If you're not going to open the door, *I'll* do it, I—"

The door swung open, though neither Chu Wanning nor the dragon had touched it. It had been ajar to begin with; perhaps the wind had nudged it wider out of pity for this grieving, lonesome man.

Chu Wanning didn't move. He took in the sight of the spare little cottage on the other side of the threshold. The trees had yet to bud, their branches still laden with snow. The wind blew, and flurries scattered like haitang blossoms through the golden morning, landing on a man's broad shoulders.

Hearing movement, the man paused, then slowly turned around.

In the shimmering light and shadow, one could almost mistake the scene for one of the flourishing heights of spring or the blazing days of summer. Before this, Chu Wanning couldn't hear the gusting of the wind,

the whisper of the snow, the rustling of the leaves. Now all of it rushed into his ears at once. The mortal world's multitudinous sights and sounds seemed to strike his chest like a surging tide. He wanted to rush forward, but his limbs felt leaden. He couldn't take a single step.

In that moment, Chu Wanning seemed to hear the cicadas that chirped below the Heaven-Piercing Tower all those years ago, during the very best years of Mo Ran's life. That bright-eyed youth had walked up to the Yuheng Elder standing in the shade of a tree. He'd walked into the genesis of it all, to that first crossing of their intertwined fates.

"Chu Wanning." The little dragon poked him on the waist.

Chu Wanning crashed back to reality. But his throat was so dry he couldn't say anything. Slowly, he walked toward the man standing under the withered tree. He walked toward the culmination of it all, toward the end of two lifetimes of desolation, toward a future without uncertainty.

The wind blew, and the leaves of the forest murmured in answer. Chu Wanning seemed to pass through an eternity wreathed in smoke and beacon fires before he finally came to stand before that man.

All those years ago the teenaged Mo Weiyu had come to a stop before Chu Wanning, still young himself. He'd looked up and grinned. *Xianjun, Xianjun*. Chu Wanning seemed to hear that bygone voice again, two lifetimes later.

I've been watching you for ages. Why won't you pay attention to me?

The valley was serene, flooded with ruddy morning light. It was as though they were the only two people left between heaven and earth. Mo Ran wore an outer robe draped over his shoulders. He had the wan complexion of someone recovering from long illness. As he watched Chu Wanning walk to him out of the sun, his pitch-black eyes welled with unspeakable tenderness. "Shizun."

The wind stilled. A brilliant ray of light speared through the clouds, illuminating the bloodstained mortal realm.

"I met a demon—and then I had a very strange experience. I'll have to tell you about it…"

The chaos had passed. Years from now, upon the ground where blood had spilled today, plum blossoms would bloom anew.

Chapter 311:
The Grand Finale

A MONTH passed.

"Come one, come all! Take a look, take a look!" In Wuchang town, a peddler's raucous shouts rang out in the sunshine. He waggled a flower-painted drum in his hand as he walked through the streets and alleys, balancing a bamboo pole on his shoulder. "Holy Night Guardians, Holy Night Guardians—thirty coppers apiece, invented by the Yuheng Elder himself! They keep evil spirits away, work like a charm for all ages. Come come, don't miss your chance!"

The peddler strode over the bluestone path in shabby straw shoes, his shadow stretching out behind him. Several giggling children ran past, hands full of tanghulu or colorful kites.

A little girl in pigtails tugged on the peddler's sleeve. "Uncle, I want to buy a Holy Night Guardian."

The peddler set down his pole and held out an automaton lacquered a peachy pink. "Here, isn't this one pretty?"

"Yes! So pretty!" the girl exclaimed, nodding. "I want this one!" As if worried someone would snatch it before she could carry it off, the girl hugged the automaton that was nearly as tall as she was to her chest with one hand and clumsily felt around in her coin pouch with the other. She painstakingly fished out one copper coin, then another, but ended up three short of the price.

"Aiya, did I lose them along the way because I was running too fast?" the girl asked nervously. She rummaged through her pouch again, even flipping it inside out to reveal the patched lining. But she could still only find twenty-seven coins. She began to panic, eyes reddening. "Da-gege, I lost the coins—this is all I have left. Is it enough?"

The peddler rubbed his grubby hands together. "Little miss," he said awkwardly, "I bought these Holy Night Guardians from a cultivator for twenty-five coppers each. If I give you a discount, I'd only make two

coppers—it wouldn't even be enough for a meal after walking around all day."

"What do I do?" The girl swiped at her eyes. "Daddy's gonna yell at me when I get home…"

Just as she broke into sobs, a man walked over, blocking the sunlight from behind her. "Mister, please take this spare silver," said an elegant voice.

Startled, the girl looked up to see a wrist clad in a snow-silk bracer. Raising her gaze, she met a pair of jade-green eyes, framed by pale gold hair that looked even softer in the morning sun.

Mei Hanxue smiled gently. "How could I let such a pretty girl shed tears over three paltry coppers?"

"Ah…" The girl blinked.

Mei Hanxue crouched down so their eyes were level. He picked up the pink Holy Night Guardian the peddler had taken away and placed it back in the girl's arms. "Even a thousand gold can't buy the tears of a beauty. Nothing's worth more than a girl's tears—so don't cry over such trifles anymore, okay?"

Next to him was a man with unremarkable features wearing a straw hat. His eyes, however, were strikingly beautiful, a rich green like jade—though they were every bit as cold as that stone, holding no discernable warmth.

The man frowned. "That's enough. She can't be older than six."

Laughing, Mei Hanxue stood up. "Dage, you're so boring. Beauties are beauties, regardless of age. Whether they're eighty or eight, tall or short, fat or thin, they're all beautiful in their own way. You've gotta learn how to compliment them. Otherwise you… Hey, where are you going?"

Mei Hänxue had heard it all before. He turned on his heel and strode off.

On the orders of Taxue Palace Leader Ming Yuelou, the Mei brothers had come to Sichuan to congratulate Sisheng Peak on the sect's reinstatement. Madam Wang's protection of Sisheng Peak's members had not been in vain: Now that the calamity had passed, all the elders and

disciples had survived without serious injury, their abilities intact. After the recent shake-up of the cultivation realm, Sisheng Peak had vaulted into the top three sects. No longer was it the shabby, languishing sect of years past.

"Mei-gongzi, the sect leader is waiting for you at the Dancing Sword Platform."

It was time for morning practice at Sisheng Peak. Most of the disciples were on the drill grounds, the whistling of their swords cutting through the stillness. A young man in elaborate robes stood alone before the railing of carved white jade. Hands clasped behind his back, he looked down at the lush world below the cloud-wrapped peak.

Mei Hanxue and his elder brother made straight for him, their footfalls soft on the new grass of the field. The man didn't turn at the sound. He only sighed. "You're here?"

"We are."

"You made me wait long enough."

Mei Hanxue couldn't hold back a laugh. "Ziming, what's with the tone?"

The man turned around. Xue Meng was as handsome as ever. A shade of boyishness yet lingered in his features. As he gazed at the Mei brothers, his expression relaxed minutely, revealing some of that old impatience and naivete. "Ugh. You guys have no idea how exhausted I am."

Seeing that the twins had come by themselves, the rest of the tension bled out of Xue Meng's body. He heaved a long sigh. "The Xuanji Elder's been on my ass about rules and regulations twenty times a day. When would I have learned this stuff? I can't even talk like a normal human being anymore; I have to speak in cryptic riddles all day long. Xuanji says it's called getting to the point…"

Mei Hanxue clapped a hand over his own mouth. "*Pff*… Ahem."

Xue Meng glared. "Just laugh if you want to. Don't pretend it's a cough."

"No, no—how could I laugh at Xue-zunzhu?" Mei Hanxue said graciously, ever the gentleman.

“You’d better not call me that ever again,” Xue Meng warned, wrinkling his nose. “I’ve had enough of it.”

The elder twin was by far the more sensible one. “You must bear with it,” he advised. “You’ll be hearing it for the rest of your life.”

Xue Meng turned away to once again gaze at the clouds below. “I’ve gotta hand it to you. That’s the single most depressing thing I’ve heard since I wound up in this position.”

Mei Hänxue blinked.

“By a long shot,” Xue Meng added.

The younger twin guffawed and slapped his knee, then turned to Xue Meng. “Being sect leader is a job like any other. Are there really so many rules you have to follow? Look at Guyueye’s Jiang Xi—he seems to do whatever he wants.”

At the mention of Jiang Xi, Xue Meng’s spine stiffened. Within his broad, gold-embroidered sleeves where no one else could see, his hands balled into fists as unease flooded him.

As it happened, Xue Meng had just returned from Guyueye a few days ago. Jiang Xi had suffered grievous injuries in the great battle. It was fortunate that his sect possessed many powerful medicines and master healers. They’d managed to save him, but his health was no longer what it had been. Most concerning was the fact that he’d been infected with demonic qi, which was causing unforeseen changes to his body.

“What will happen to him?” Xue Meng had asked one of Guyueye’s elders outside the door to Jiang Xi’s room.

“Hard to say,” replied the elder. “The gate to the demon realm hasn’t been opened in millennia. We have no records of what happens to humans infected by demonic qi. The sect leader is out of danger for now, but we can’t predict the long-term effects.”

Xue Meng shot a worried glance toward the room’s entrance, shrouded in layer upon layer of jade-green gauze. Never mind Jiang Xi’s condition—Xue Meng couldn’t even tell how his quarters were laid out.

“Can he be cured?”

The elder shook his head. “I’m afraid it will be challenging.”

Xue Meng closed his eyes, anxiety simmering in his chest. “If you ever need anything, come to me at Sisheng Peak anytime,” he said at last.

This elder had no idea what had transpired between Xue Meng and Jiang Xi, but even he could sense there was some complex new dimension to their relationship. He sank into a respectful bow. “I offer my sincere thanks to Xue-zhangmen.”

Xue Meng waved a hand, peering again into the abstruse depths of those curtains. He wanted badly to see Jiang Xi in the flesh, but the sleeping quarters of the sect leader were more closely guarded than a lady’s boudoir. And as the sect leader in question was unconscious, it wasn’t as if anyone else could invite him in. Unsure how to respond, Xue Meng knit his brows. “I’ve returned Xuehuang to the elder who manages the sect’s weapon arsenal. Please let Jiang-zhangmen know when he’s well enough.”

“Of course,” answered the elder. He noticed Xue Meng still hovering, as if he had more to say. “May I ask if Xue-zhangmen has any additional instructions?”

“Never mind; it’s fine. I’m leaving.”

“Many thanks to Xue-zhangmen for coming all this way,” the elder said, nodding courteously.

Xue Meng had had his fair share of public clashes with Jiang Xi, but that had been as the young master of Sisheng Peak. Now that he was sect leader, Guyueye’s people wouldn’t slight him if they could avoid it. Several elders and healers accompanied Xue Meng as he descended the steps of Ascension Hall, with its graceful swooping roof ridges of jade-green tile. Guyueye was nourished by a stream of spiritual energy all year round, and its flowers bloomed regardless of the season.

Xue Meng glanced around. Although wispy snow flurries were still falling on Rainbell Isle, lush blossoms flourished in the brisk air. Catching sight of a spray of pollia flowers, especially luxuriant, Xue Meng couldn’t have said what he felt.

He paced down the open-air corridor, the boards creaking softly beneath his feet. A bell shaped like the head of a beast rang beneath the eaves; Xue Meng looked up at the sound. A young man around his own age was rounding the corner, coming toward him. Behind him were two lines of

attendants with daggers at their waists. The young man's face was extraordinarily handsome, his shoulders broad. In the morning light, he radiated a disarming warmth and vitality. When it came to looks, Xue Meng was difficult to impress—yet even he couldn't help sneaking a few more glances at this man.

As he neared Xue Meng, the young man stopped and bowed very properly: respectful but not obsequious. "Xue-zhangmen."

Xue Meng pulled to a halt. "And this is…"

"Ah, this is the sect leader's personal attendant." The elder smiled, sensing Xue Meng's apprehension toward this young man. "He's been helping the sect leader manage various affairs within Guyueye in recent years. He doesn't often show his face outside Rainbell Isle, but the sect leader thinks very highly of him."

Xue Meng hummed in acknowledgment.

The young man rose from his bow to find Xue Meng scrutinizing him. He broke into a smile.

Now Xue Meng could study the young man's face up close. Though he didn't usually pay much attention to the appearances of others, this man's good looks were striking indeed. His eyes, especially, were bright and soft, as though stars sparkled from within their depths. It was a face that etched itself into the viewer's memory at first sight.

Xue Meng narrowed his eyes and examined the man with renewed energy, trying to find some shortcoming over which he could feel superior. But even after looking him up and down several times, there was nothing to find fault with. This young man was surpassingly good-looking. He was young yet reserved in temperament, with gentle features and a tall, well-proportioned build. His skin was so clear and luminous it seemed to glow from within.

Such a fine young man belonged among the upper cultivation world's gallant heroes. He didn't deserve to be squirreled away in Guyueye, toiling in the dark, Xue Meng thought stiffly. To hide a jewel like this in the dust—Jiang Yechen really was a piece of work.

The fine young man was discomfited by Xue Meng's unblinking regard. Nevertheless, his voice was warm and polite as he asked, "Xue-

zhangmen, is there something I can assist you with?"

Only then did Xue Meng come to his senses. "No, it's nothing." But he continued to stare openly. Even the best attendant, no matter how well-esteemed, would have no formal status. If Xue Meng didn't ask him outright, this man would never volunteer his name—it would be considered an affront to the sect leader.

The perceptive medicine elder had noted Xue Meng's curiosity. "Xue-zhangmen, he might be young, but he can handle anything that arises on Rainbell Isle," he said with an enthusiastic smile. "He puts us elders to shame."

The young man bit his lip, reddening slightly in embarrassment. "The elder is too kind."

Xue Meng was growing only more intrigued. Seeing that one of the attendants behind the young man carried a lacquered tray, he asked, "Are you going to see Jiang Xi?"

The young man hadn't expected Xue Meng would call his sect leader by his given name. He swiftly recovered from his shock and nodded, smiling again. "Mn."

What a perfect opportunity—if Xue Meng hinted that he wanted to go with him to pay his respects in person, there was no way the young man would refuse him. Here was his chance to enter Jiang Xi's room via honest means and see for himself what sort of sorry state he was in.

Xue Meng cleared his throat. Yet before he could speak, he heard the young man say amicably, "I'm bringing Yifu his medicine."

Xue Meng froze, his face falling. "What?"

"Sorry, I almost forgot," the elder said hurriedly. "He's also Jiang-zhangmen's adopted son."

Xue Meng stared, thunderstruck.

Moments later, several elders could be seen hurrying after an ashen-faced Xue Meng as he strode down the corridor outside Ascension Hall. "Xue-zhangmen?" they anxiously called after him.

"Xue-zhangmen, what's wrong?"

“Are you unwell?”

The new leader of Sisheng Peak stomped down the steps, steel-toed boots clicking against the wood. His jaw was clenched, his expression stormy. He didn’t give a damn what pets Jiang Xi kept at home—that was none of his business. What rankled him was that Jiang Xi quite obviously had a highly capable adopted son in his own sect, yet still acted like he was all alone in his old age before everyone else.

Was it some kind of play for sympathy? It was more than shameless—it was nauseating.

Seeing the strange expression on Xue Meng’s face as he recalled this encounter, Mei Hanxue asked, “What’s going on with you?”

“Nothing,” said Xue Meng. “I just thought of someone, that’s all.”

He didn’t want to talk any more about Jiang Xi. After changing the subject, they chatted for a while longer until Xue Meng led the twins to Sisheng Peak’s ancestral temple to light fresh incense for their departed heroes.

As they entered, Mei Hanxue spotted an unusual-looking tablet beside the altar. A piece of red cloth obscured the name beneath.

“That’s for Mo Ran,” said Xue Meng.

At Mei Hanxue’s silence, Xue Meng continued, his expression coolly inscrutable. “Everyone says he’s dead, but I don’t think so. After we came through the rift that day, Shizun walked down Kunlun Mountain. He was clearly going somewhere; he just didn’t want anyone to come along.” He pressed his lips together, then lowered his lashes. “At any rate, I refuse to believe Mo Ran vanished just like that.”

“Xue Meng…”

Xue Meng turned his face away, squinting into the sunlight outside. “That damn mutt Mo Ran always insisted on doing things his own way. He doesn’t care what’s normal.” Xue Meng paused. “I’m sure that hasn’t changed.”

Mei Hanxue heaved a sigh but didn’t contradict him. The twins knelt and bowed to their benefactors. Xue Meng stood to the side, eyes closed in

silence. Once they finished paying their respects, Mei Hanxue rose and patted Xue Meng on the shoulder. “Ziming, you’ll be a good sect leader.”

Xue Meng opened his eyes. Ash scattered from the burning incense. Through the veil of smoke, Xue Meng looked at his father’s memorial tablet, black with stark white words. “I won’t be better than him,” he said evenly.

No one replied.

“Let’s go.” Xue Meng waved a hand and strode out of the temple.

The twins exchanged a glance. They sighed, then followed Xue Meng out the door.

Within the solemn walls of the ancestral temple, a clump of ash whispered down. Though the three young visitors were no longer present, the sticks of incense they’d left behind on the dark, glossy altar remained. The small tablet of lacquered wood hadn’t been inscribed with the name or title of the departed man, as one would expect. Behind those three pinpricks of light, the wooden tablet bore words Xue Meng had carved with his own hand:

Here lies a father, his kindness irreplaceable, his loyalty unsurpassed.

At the very bottom of the tablet were carved three comical words. The Mei twins and Xue Meng all knew that if Xue Zhengyong were watching from the heavens, he’d surely let out a familiar booming laugh at the sight of them. The everbright lanterns flickered, illuminating the elegant, calligraphic script—modeled after Xue Zhengyong’s own writing, every stroke fluid and effortless.

Xue Is Beautiful.

That night, Sisheng Peak held a feast to welcome the visitors from Taxue Palace. The two sects were on close terms, and this was a private event, closed to the prying eyes of outsiders. Nevertheless, stories soon began to circulate. Rumor had it that the newly instated Sect Leader Xue had downed several cups of liquor at the feast and become hopelessly inebriated.

Sect Leader Xue was a chatty drunk, and that night, he had quite a lot to say. He'd alternated between crying over his parents, ranting about his gege, whining for his shizun, and mistaking his attendants for Shi Mei. Every other coherent word out of his mouth—which were few as it was—was one of their names. But of all his old friends, Mei Hanxue was the only one who had come.

Deep in his cups, Xue Meng sprawled over a table, head pillowed on his arms beneath the glow of the lamps. He stared at Mengpo Hall over the crook of his elbow, watching a blurry crowd milling about, drinking and making merry.

In that crowd, he saw Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang toasting each other; he saw Shi Mei and Mo Ran folding dumplings. Later, after most of the guests had left and his surroundings had quieted, he saw the Yuheng Elder in a bright red cloak, standing in the drifting snow outside. He shook the flurries off his oil-paper umbrella, then strode toward the rest of them.

"Sect Leader, you're drunk."

Xue Meng heard these words only vaguely. He didn't heed them. Eventually, there came a sigh, and the weight of a warm robe draped over his shoulders. Who had sighed? Was it the Xuanji Elder or the Tanlang Elder, or someone else entirely?

Later still, someone patted him on the head. "Young master, you're drunk."

He made a garbled noise of agreement, but somehow, tears were running down his cheeks. He buried his face in his arms.

It was late; the hall was a mess, and the party was over. Xue Meng didn't speak or grab anyone's arm to wail and make a fuss. He was trying to grow up, to grow into his father, as fast as possible. Maybe next year he wouldn't be such a lightweight. And in a few more years he wouldn't babble so foolishly even if he did get drunk. Years after that, hardly anyone would know what Xue Ziming of Sisheng Peak looked like when he cried. Gradually he would stretch his limbs to the sky as a big, strong tree, capable of holding up all of Sichuan, even the whole cultivation realm. Someday, the nights he used to bawl his eyes out and gulp his wine without a care

would become light-hearted tales with which Sect Leader Xue would regale his juniors.

Such was the fate of every generation. When Xue Meng himself grew old, the youngsters would tell of their elders' adventures, but no one would have witnessed them first-hand. Perhaps the details of those glory days would fade with time, a story told in broad strokes. In the end, all that remained would be those familiar words on Xue Meng's fan: *Xue Is Beautiful*.

Several days after the Mei twins returned to Taxue Palace, an announcement went out to the entire cultivation realm.

"Beginning in the new year, Kunlun Taxue Palace will formally enter an alliance with Sisheng Peak. United in purpose, our sects will join forces to bring peace to the land with no distinction between the upper and lower cultivation realms. Sect Leader Ming Yuelou and Sect Leader Xue Ziming hereby announce their partnership as a testament to their loyalty and dedication to the people of this world."

The news caused quite a stir. Some voiced hearty approval, while others were bewildered. Yet others received the news in silence: They knew this new alliance would shift the balance of power across the world, perhaps within the next decade or two, perhaps even sooner. The boundaries between the upper and lower cultivation realms would slowly blur.

"Isn't this a good thing?" someone asked his friend as they chatted over tea.

The friend took a sip of his snowy fragrance tea and shook his head. "Who can say? Back in the day, Nangong Changying brought the nine great sects together to form the upper cultivation realm in hope that the lands they presided over would become a paradise on earth. Everyone clapped and cheered then, but it didn't live up to its promise. Only time will tell whether or not this is a noble choice."

"Ah, very true."

"At least we won't be living under a tyrant, though. Guyueye's no match for Taxue Palace and Sisheng Peak's combined strength."

"Eh, hard to say. Jiang Xi's not one to play nice."

"Forget it; what's the point of getting too involved? One step at a time—and anyway, we should worry about ourselves first. Mm…these snake gall melon seeds are pretty good." The man called out toward the bamboo screen: "Miss, another catty, please!"

As winter yielded to spring, the wounds across the lands had slowly begun to heal. With the aid of the great sects, the villages and towns that had been ravaged by strife were rebuilt one after another.

There had been some who'd lost all hope to the darkness, but fortunately, it was never too late for human hearts to change. Perhaps there'd come a day when cheers would fill what was now silence, and fireworks would bloom across what was now an empty sky. Those who'd followed blindly would open their eyes, and those who'd held their tongues would speak. The meek would stand firm before those who would intimidate them, and the honest would drown out lies with truth.

Everything was constantly renewed and rebuilt, like a city rising from the ruins. Yet the line between good and evil was often still difficult to discern. This was not in itself a problem—after all, it was impossible to understand anything completely. Most people didn't even understand themselves. Consider this simple question: You have a pair of eyes, but have you ever really seen your own face?

"Bravo! Another story!"

In Linyi, beneath an old scholar tree, a storyteller nodded to his audience after finishing his tale.

"Chu-xianzun is such a good person." One of the listeners dabbed at her eyes. "I wonder where he is now?"

"Mo-xianzun really got screwed over," someone else said with a sigh.

A little girl only half as tall as the grownups around her sucked on the tanghulu in her hand, her dark eyes shining and her cheeks wet with tears. Sniffling, she turned toward the boy with her. "Wah, I don't like Nangong-gege and Ye-jiejie's story."

Her friend blinked. "Why not?"

The girl swiped at her tears with the back of her hand. “They all died.”

“But Ye Wangxi didn’t die,” the boy muttered.

The girl hiccupped. “You don’t get it. Boys are dumb! She’d be less sad if she died, wahhh…”

Faced with the girl’s angry tears, the boy was at something of a loss. He scratched his head, then said, “Come on, stop crying. Hey—let’s play house. I’ll be Nangong Si, you be Ye Wangxi. We’ll make up our own story… Aiya, don’t cry, don’t cry.”

The boy plucked a leaf the size of his hand from the tree and put it over the girl’s cheek to cheer her up. “Here, take your veil. Let’s bow to heaven and earth and get married!”

The girl blinked, then laughed through her tears.

In the eyes of a child, pain was something that could be rewritten; there was no burden that wouldn’t eventually lighten. All their love and hatred, their bitter goodbyes, would slowly be woven into the jianghu’s lore. Beneath the old scholar trees, the storytellers would speak their legends into existence. They’d trade in the vicissitudes of these heroes’ lives, peddling their glory or their shame for a handful of tears and a crowd’s applause.

The two childhood sweethearts solemnly took their bows with the leaf as a veil. Eyes only for each other, they called sweetly, “We bow first to heaven and earth—we bow second to our parents—”

A black-robed cultivator strolled by the scholar tree. The newcomer possessed elegant, handsome features, and wore an old quiver on a belt, its exquisite embroidery faded with age. There were no arrows in it; now that the great battle was over, the world was at peace. Instead, a little pup with golden claws was curled up inside. Whimpering softly, he peered out at the world beyond.

The cultivator stopped beneath the tree, watching the two children with the ghost of a smile. After a moment, she walked over and handed a red handkerchief to the girl.

“Huh?” The girl froze. “What’s this? And who are you?”

"How can you get married with a leaf on your head?" the cultivator said in lieu of answering. "Here—this is for you."

The handkerchief was well-worn, made of soft, fine fabric. In the corner was embroidered the character *Si*. It was a keepsake from many years ago. When she'd gotten scared in that training illusion and started to sob, Nangong Si had fished out this handkerchief for her to wipe her tears.

The girl looked the handkerchief over, then broke into a sunny smile. "Thank you, Jiejie," she said, raising her head.

The cultivator blinked in surprise. Her eyes lit up, shining like stars. For years now, it had been a scant few who could tell at a glance that she was a woman. On top of her appearance, there was also the voice-changing spell she could never remove. It seemed this little maiden had quite a sharp eye.

The cultivator shook her head, then straightened and patted Naobaijin's soft head. "Time to go—what are you staring at?"

Naobaijin whined.

The breeze picked up, rustling the leaves of the scholar tree. The storyteller was narrating the battle at Mount Jiao, in which Nangong Si had thrown himself into the blood pool to subdue the demon dragon. The crowd listened with rapt attention, a few wiping their eyes as the story reached its climax. But the cultivator no longer cried. She turned toward the distant mountains, a solitary, straight-backed figure in black. Behind her, the girl and boy's sweet voices floated over the breeze. "Now, as husband and wife, we bow to each other—"

She stepped out of the scholar tree's shade into dazzling sunlight. Though she didn't know why, a smile stole across her face, eyes curving into crescents as warmth bloomed in her chest. There was nothing better than being a kid, she thought. Even the most solemn rituals of eternal love were performed so freely and easily.

She'd walked some distance before she heard the sound of a child's hurried footsteps behind her. "Da-jiejie! Your handkerchief!"

Without turning her head, she gallantly waved a hand.

Naobaijin looked up at her with a wide-eyed, confused stare, as if to ask, *That's A-Si's old handkerchief—you don't want it anymore?*

She grinned, her gaze soft. "Nope."

The field before her spread out in all its springtime splendor, teeming with new life. She caught a flash out of the corner of her eye—Nangong Si was standing next to her. She wasn't surprised to see him. His face still held a touch of willfulness, prideful and self-assured.

"I know you're there," she said.

The phantom Nangong Si knit his brows in apparent disapproval.

"Don't be mad," she said softly. "They were getting married, but they didn't have a veil. So I gave them your handkerchief."

Nangong Si glowered silently.

"A handkerchief for a happy union—isn't that something to smile about?"

Beneath that brilliant sunlight, Nangong Si offered her a begrudging smile. It was uglier than if he'd made a face.

She smiled too, lowering her lashes. When she looked up again, Nangong Si was gone. But she knew he'd be back. He was neither a ghost nor an illusion. He was in her heart, so she'd be able to see him whenever she wanted, as handsome and high-spirited as he was in life.

Time passed. In the blink of an eye, New Year's Eve drew near. According to the customs of the cultivation realm, Xue Meng's period of mourning for his parents had ended. Thus, in the last month of the year, he officially took up the mantle of Sisheng Peak's leader. People flocked to Sichuan from near and far to congratulate him in the lavish celebration that followed.

In that darkless night spangled with lanterns and fireworks, Xue Meng dutifully observed all the formalities propriety demanded, as outlined

by the Xuanji Elder. He wore an elaborate jade crown and the sect leader's ring. His ceremonial robes were composed of nine layers of silk and gauze, so fine even the flying dragon motifs curling around his cuffs boasted embroidered eyes of tiny fire-tempered pearls.

As he stood within the solemn expanse of Loyalty Hall, his face, handsome and mature, might have been carved from Kunlun jade. If any had known to look, they would have seen that his resemblance to Jiang Xi was most apparent in his eyes. But he'd never take the surname Jiang, and he had no wish to be likened to Jiang Xi.

"Congratulations, esteemed Sect Leader."

The Xuanji Elder led the disciples of Sisheng Peak in bowing first. They knelt in a great wave, light glancing from their armor. The rest of the celebrants followed suit, lowering their heads one after another. The rumble of movement reverberated like the roll of thunder across the misty mountain peak.

"Congratulations, esteemed Sect Leader."

Fireworks bloomed across the night sky, marking the beginning of a new golden age for Sisheng Peak. What belonged to the past—whether pain or comfort—was gone forever.

Xue Meng smiled. His eyes were dark and calm, but duller than they once were. He raised his cup and drank with the guests. The gesture was measured and dignified, a far cry from the laughable gaffes he might have made before.

In the crowd, Mei Hanxue sighed quietly. He closed his eyes. "This guy… He's really becoming Nangong Liu."

"Watch your mouth."

Mei Hanxue eyed his brother. "I'm not saying there's anything wrong with it. I just mean his new position."

"I don't care what you mean," the older twin said coldly. "Anyway, twenty-six girls have already come looking for you since the beginning of the banquet. Take off your mask. I've had enough."

Mei Hanxue's masked brow crumpled in exasperation.

After the feast concluded, Sisheng Peak arranged for its disciples to receive the visiting sect leaders, elders, and disciples according to their station. With so many guests, there was no other way to manage it. The visitors made their way back to their quarters, unsteady with wine. They had come to witness a transition of power, and each had their own preoccupations.

Xue Meng, too, returned to his room. He wasn't drunk today; the Tanlang Elder's sobering soup was extremely effective. Kneading at his brow, he sank into a chair. He wanted to shed all those heavy pendants and jade tokens, but after glancing at the mirror, he couldn't figure out where to begin.

The Xuanji Elder rapped on the door and let himself in. "Sect Leader."

"Yeah?" Xue Meng mumbled listlessly.

"Here's a list of all the gifts the other sects sent. Jielü forgot to bring it to you earlier." Xuanji handed him a thick booklet with a red and gold cover. "Look it over with care so we can return their gestures appropriately."

Xue Meng's exhaustion compounded. "Okay, got it."

"Also, Jiang-zhangmen is asking for a private audience with you."

"I don't want to see him."

Xuanji didn't insist; he'd always been the most emotionally astute of Sisheng Peak's elders. "Then I'll turn down his request in a moment," he said with a sigh.

"Is there anything else?"

"That's it."

Xue Meng had been hoping there might be. In fact, what he really wanted to hear was *Two mysterious guests showed up and asked to see you*. But Xuanji said no such thing. He saw himself out, closing the carved red door of the sect leader's quarters behind him.

Xue Ziming stood alone and unmoving in that spacious room for some time. Eventually, he lit a lamp and began to peruse the register of gifts.

The gifts were listed in descending order of extravagance. Guyueye, the richest of the sects, was naturally at the top. The register was full of flashy-sounding words like "flame-plumed tail feathers" and "spiritual whale pearls." Xue Meng had never even heard of some of these items. Jiang Xi didn't hesitate when it came to spending his money.

But Xue Meng wasn't in the mood to pore over lists of treasures. He riffled through the booklet, scanning for Chu Wanning and Mo Ran's names. Although many wandering cultivators hadn't attended the celebration in person, they'd still sent gifts. Today was one of the most important days of Xue Meng's life. If Mo Ran were still alive, if Chu Wanning remained in the jianghu, they had to have heard about his accession to sect leader.

Taxue Palace, Huohuang Pavilion, Wubei Temple… He flipped page after page. He turned back to the pages listing gifts from cultivators unaffiliated with any sect, reading them a dozen times over. But they weren't there.

Xue Meng sat back in his carved rosewood chair, sinking into the soft cushion. He brought a weary hand to his forehead.

They weren't there.

His shizun, his…cousin—it was like they'd vanished. There'd been no trace of them since that great battle.

From outside came the sounds of laughter and the crackle and whine of firecrackers. But the leader of Sisheng Peak remained holed up in his room. Wetness slowly gathered on his lashes.

He still couldn't accept the way Chu Wanning and Mo Ran had deceived him. He'd likely never be able to see the two of them again without feeling a wedge had been driven between them. But when all was said and done, deep down, he was terribly worried about them.

When they'd set up the tablets in the ancestral temple, everyone had told him Mo Ran was dead. But Xue Meng refused to budge—he needed to see the body before he would believe it. Without the evidence of his own eyes, there was no way he would allow that red cloth to be removed from the tablet.

In truth, there was no turning back from all that had happened. Though he'd tried to put himself in their shoes, he couldn't make himself feel at ease. As soon as he remembered what they'd hidden from him, his heart seemed to seize in his chest and his stomach twisted in knots; he could barely breathe. He knew, too, that it was precisely for this reason that Chu Wanning and Mo Ran might never return to Sisheng Peak. Such a relationship between shizun and disciple was strictly forbidden; the world would never accept them.

But couldn't they at least send a letter—couldn't they at least tell him they were okay?

Xue Meng blew out a breath and laid a hand over his quivering eyelids.

Suddenly, a sound like a distant sigh drifted in from the window. He was on his feet in an instant, rushing over to push open the window panel.

The light of the fireworks flickered over his face. He looked left and then right; there was no one there. But a long, thin brocade box hung from the peach tree just outside the window.

Xue Meng reached out, every muscle tensed. He opened the box with trembling fingers.

A firework hissed as it shot into the sky, bursting into a thousand glittering stars against the dark night. By the light of those dazzling motes, Xue Meng beheld the narrow scimitar nestled within the box, pristine as if freshly forged. Its silver hilt gave way to a long, tapering blade, inlaid with a gleaming lunar crystal.

It was a newly restored Longcheng.

Shaking from head to toe, Xue Meng tucked the box into his robes and vaulted out the window. He leapt into the air above the garden and yelled, "Shizun!"

The only answer he received was the soft whistling of the breeze through the quiet back courtyard.

"Shizun!" he screamed wildly. "Mo Ran! Where are you?!"

The night wind was cool, brisk and damp on his cheeks. He scrambled through the flowers and plants, heedless of the twigs scratching

his arms and snagging in his robes.

"Show yourselves!"

His voice had risen to a tearful howl. Xue Meng slowed to a stop. His spine bent as he curled in on himself. "Come back…" he whimpered.

A faint melody floated past on the wind—the reedy sound of a leaf flute. Xue Meng froze. He slowly turned in the direction of the music.

Finally, he saw them—but they were already far away, below the distant Heaven-Piercing Tower. Behind the tower's dignified ornamental eaves, those two familiar figures had paused, one sitting, one standing. The one sitting balanced the holy weapon Jiuge on his lap, sleeves flying in the wind. The one standing was clad in close-fitting black robes, playing a bamboo leaf between his fingers.

"I visit old friends with the bright moon on high, faces red beneath the lanternlight. The young phoenix crows to greet the spring dawn over leagues of mountains and rivers at peace. Save the wine you hid in our youth, for your brother will return to see you in time. We needn't remain always so close at hand—whenever I miss you, I'll send the east wind."

The distant sounds of the qin and the leaf flute flowed from those figures beneath the silvery moon and drifted into the immaculate night.

The congratulatory song came to an end. There was a flash of golden light: Chu Wanning had summoned his paper dragon. The pair leapt onto the dragon's back and soared away on the wind.

Afterward, Xue Meng found two letters written in very similar hands tucked into that brocade box. One was from Chu Wanning, and the other was from Mo Weiyu.

Mo Weiyu had written a lengthy letter containing details of various stories and events, and laying out many secrets he had kept from Xue Meng in the past. He confessed that because they were unsure how the world would receive them, they didn't want to show up without warning and risk dragging Sisheng Peak's name through the mud again. As for Longcheng, he and Chu Wanning had gathered the materials over the past few months and found a way to reforge the blade anew. He hoped Xue Meng would find it useful.

Chu Wanning's letter was much shorter, containing only a few lines in his neat, precise hand:

Sect Leader, guilt weighs on my heart; I am ashamed to face you. The road ahead is yet long; pray look after yourself. Within Longcheng's hilt is embedded a Nightglow Haitang Blossom. May it keep you company when I cannot. If ever my meager abilities may be of use, I am yours to command. Yuheng.

Xue Meng stared at the words *Sect Leader* for a long, long time. Even as the darkest, stillest hours of the night descended upon the abandoned drinking cups, he remained awake, lost in his thoughts. Perhaps he'd never again hear his shizun call him by name; there would only ever be that title, *Sect Leader*. At this thought, he felt more frustrated than ever with the rules and regulations of the world.

But—at least Chu Wanning and Mo Ran were still there. Maybe he'd be a thousand miles removed from them in the future; maybe their paths wouldn't cross for years. But at least they could look up and admire the same moon from whichever far-flung corners of the earth they settled in. This knowledge, at last, brought him some small measure of comfort.

At the foot of Sisheng Peak, in Wuchang Town, two men in hooded cloaks walked out of the darkness and strode through the bustling night market. They stopped at a food stall hung with bright lanterns.

The taller man spoke up. "Sir, a pot of clear gudong soup, with bamboo shoots, tofu, bean curd skin, spinach, sliced beef, sliced lamb, tripe, crispy pork, crystal filleted fish, lotus shrimp balls—"

"That's enough, we won't be able to finish it," his companion cut in.

"Okay—in that case, we'll add a sweet-and-sour squirrel fish and two jars of soy milk—"

His companion's lips pressed into a tight line. "Stop ordering."

These, of course, were none other than Chu Wanning and Mo Weiyu, who had come down the mountain after delivering Xue Meng's gift.

"—and some sweet osmanthus lotus root," Mo Ran concluded. He smiled. "Do you know how to make it here?"

"We didn't used to," the stallkeeper responded enthusiastically. "It's a dish from the Jiangnan and Huai River regions, you know. But Sisheng Peak's Mengpo Hall often makes it, and we're right here at the bottom of the mountain, so we learned from them. Right, we also have a special menu here, a heroes' combo—do you want a look?"

Chu Wanning furrowed his brow. "Sorry, what kind of menu?"

"A heroes' combo. You guys never heard of it?" The waiter puffed out his chest. "The two cultivators who saved the world are both from our Sisheng Peak, don't you know? Heh, these days all the spots in Wuchang Town know how to make a few of their favorite dishes!"

The waiter plucked two sets of bamboo slips from his belt and handed them to Chu Wanning and Mo Ran. "This one is Chu-xianjun's menu." As if worried they still didn't understand, the waiter continued his animated explanation. "Apparently, Chu-xianjun likes food that's kind of charred and burnt, so we have charred meatballs, super crunchy guoba, burnt tofu with cabbage—oh yeah, and the squirrel fish here is fried extra-crispy too."

Chu Wanning listened in stony-faced silence, while Mo Ran took a sip of tea to cover his laughter. But when he glanced down at "Mo-xianjun's Menu," he almost spit it out. He burst into a fit of coughing.

The waiter jumped. "Aiya, mister, are you okay? Can I get you anything?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine, ahem…" Sputtering, Mo Ran pointed at the second set of bamboo slips. "What *is* this? Why do you have a bunch of pastries with sweet haitang filling on here? Is that even a thing?"

"Apparently Mo-xianjun likes sweets."

Mo Ran blinked.

"And he likes haitang blossoms," the waiter nodded sagely. "So our boss invented these sweet haitang pastries. There's tons of sugar inside—they're three times sweeter than normal pastries, guaranteed to make your tongue tingle!"

"Is something like that even edible?"

“Of course it is,” answered the waiter. “They’re super popular. Do you two want one combo each from Mo-xianjun and Chu-xianjun’s menus? These are all their favorites—you won’t be disappointed!”

Chu Wanning’s head was starting to ache. “No thank you. I don’t like burnt stuff.”

Mo Ran laughed. “And I don’t really like sweets.”

“Ah, too bad, too bad.” The waiter scratched his head ruefully. He seemed to hold these new menus in high regard: Even after he turned away, they could hear him grumbling, “But these are our saviors’ favorite dishes… Aren’t they at least worth a try…”

Chu Wanning sat in mute shock, while Mo Ran let out a snort.

“What are you laughing at?” Chu Wanning eyed him. “Is it that funny?”

“Not really,” said Mo Ran, his eyes dark and gleaming. “I’m just happy. As long as I’m happy, anything can make me laugh.”

He glanced at the bustling streets. The chaos had passed, and the warmth of the mortal world had been rekindled. Women picked out cosmetics and bought red paper goods ahead of the new year. Men gathered around the food stalls, drinking and chatting. In the brilliant glow of the lanterns, their faces were relaxed and cheerful; even their greasy cheeks seemed like a sign of good health.

A pack of children roamed the street, shouting and laughing. They were playing some sort of game—one child wore a mask, while the others scurried away from him like rabbits. “Don’t let him catch you!” they called out between fits of giggling.

Mo Ran propped his chin in his hand. There was something endearingly earnest about the gesture, adding to his handsomeness. He heaved a contented sigh. “How wonderful.” He looked up toward the lights twinkling from Sisheng Peak. “How wonderful,” he said again.

“Not everything’s so wonderful,” Chu Wanning pointed out. “You heard Xue Meng calling for us just now.”

Mo Ran fell silent, then mustered a smile. “But if we’d really stayed, it would only make things harder for him.”

"I know."

The first of their dishes arrived. As he ate, Mo Ran muttered, "Xue Meng is still too much of a kid. This is the best arrangement we could hope for. If we went back to Sisheng Peak, only trouble would come of it. Plus, he could probably put up with me for a couple days, but a couple months? No way." He crunched a peanut between his teeth, looking affronted. "He'd throw me out."

Suppressing a laugh, Chu Wanning tapped him on the head with the blunt end of his chopsticks. "*You're* the one who's acting like a kid."

"I'm serious," replied Mo Ran. "If he throws me out, it's not like I can refuse the sect leader's orders. Perish the thought."

This won a soft chuckle from Chu Wanning. "Don't joke. He'd never throw you out. We're the ones who don't want to stay. Don't shift the blame onto him."

"Okay." Mo Ran scratched his head and grinned, two dimples tucking themselves into his cheeks. "Whatever Savior-gege says."

"Eat," said Chu Wanning. "We'll go home when we're done."

They were presently living deep in the forest of Nanping Mountain. Ever since Mo Ran's souls had returned to his body, they'd rarely left that cottage. They hadn't intended to enter seclusion, but the circumstances happened to be just right. Thus they'd made a home in that idyllic corner of the world.

Everything was as perfect as it could be.

Selecting a piece of crispy pork, Mo Ran smiled more broadly, black eyes curving into crescents. "Actually, you're right. I *am* the one to blame."

"Hm?"

"I don't want to stay."

"Are you worried he'll be mad at you?"

"Nah." Mo Ran rubbed his nose and chuckled. "I'm afraid he'd call me Shiniang."

Chu Wanning glared.

Mo Ran's eyes were dark as ink, almost purple in the shifting light. These days, that sharp purple gleam had softened to a gentle shimmer. He heaved a sigh. "I jumped ahead an entire generation, just like that."

"Eat!"

Mo Ran lowered his head and obediently ate. One could almost see a pair of canine ears sprouting from his head, tamely flopping downward.

He wasn't truly unwilling to return to Sisheng Peak, and Chu Wanning knew it. In truth, all of them—Mo Ran, Xue Meng, and himself—wanted to be together again. But time's passage wore everyone down. Those days of blissful ignorance had run their course, and no one could wish them back into existence.

All three of them understood this. But Mo Ran didn't want Chu Wanning to be sad. He'd rather shoulder the blame himself and tease him until he laughed.

"Speaking of which, I never actually asked you," said Chu Wanning. "After the battle… How did you know you'd be able to come back?"

Mo Ran shoveled rice into his mouth, considering the question. "Will you be angry if I tell you the truth?"

Chu Wanning fixed him with a clear-eyed stare. "Go ahead."

Mo Ran rubbed the back of his neck and ducked his head, smiling. "When the gate to the demon realm opened, I could feel spiritual energy circulating in me… But Taxian-jun was in charge back then. My mind wasn't clear, so I didn't realize the implications."

"Mn."

"It was at the very end, when I was almost gone, that the idea occurred to me." He paused. "I was betting I was like Song Xingyi—one of those special Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts. The ancient scrolls say the demon race can be reborn as long as their bodies are preserved and their souls are complete, right? So I thought…if I was right, I should be able to return to my body, as long as I wanted it badly enough."

A tiny furrow appeared between Chu Wanning's brows. "I always thought the stories about the souls of demons being able to return to their

bodies were no more than legends." He hesitated, then asked, "But in that case, why was Song Qiutong unable to resurrect herself?"

"Even if a demon *can* come back to life, it's only possible if their desire to live is extremely strong," Mo Ran said with a helpless shrug. "That feeling was like… How do I explain it? It was like someone put a rope in my hands before pushing me off a cliff. But the rope was covered in oil—if my attention slipped even a little, I would've fallen into the abyss. I had to hold on with everything I had and pull myself up. I couldn't let myself relax for a moment until I came back to my body."

Mo Ran looked up and met his eyes. "Wanning, all I could think about was how I needed to find you. That's what brought me back."

The lanterns above them swayed in the wind. As Chu Wanning gazed into Mo Ran's eyes, so deep and dark, he felt something melt inside his chest. It was a vulnerable feeling, disconcertingly unfamiliar, and he quickly turned his face away.

Mo Ran grinned. "There's another reason."

"Hm?"

"Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts are only half-demon. Before the gate to the demon realm opened, we wouldn't have been able to achieve rebirth that way," Mo Ran explained. "But when we absorbed the demonic qi, it made us stronger. Otherwise, we're like ordinary mortals. After I absorbed that demonic energy, I realized it was even more powerful than my spiritual core. Even though my heart in this body was badly damaged, I thought I might be able to reverse it."

"So when you told me to go back, you actually *weren't* sure whether or not you'd be reborn…" Chu Wanning trailed off.

It wasn't until Mo Ran saw Chu Wanning's eyes narrow slightly that he realized his mistake. He cleared his throat. "Hey, this fish is pretty good."

But Chu Wanning was not so easily put off. "If you hadn't come back, there would've only been your ice-cold corpse waiting for me once I got to Nanping Mountain," he said, his stare drilling into Mo Ran.

Mo Ran could hardly stand to hear him sound so grim. He ducked his head, biting his lip in silence before looking up again. “That’s right.”

Chu Wanning blinked, taken aback.

“I couldn’t bear to let you die. Whether or not I was able to live.”

The ends of Chu Wanning’s eyes had reddened—perhaps in pain, or because he was about to lose his temper. Mo Ran covered Chu Wanning’s hand on the table with his own and gently rubbed his fingers. Haloed by the rich lamplight, he said hoarsely, “I knew it might be a lie—but even if you hated me and resented me for the rest of your life, I couldn’t watch you die in front of me.”

He closed his eyes, lashes quivering. “I’d already experienced that in two lifetimes.”

Slowly, the tension bled out of Chu Wanning’s spine, and his clenched fingers relaxed. But the tails of his eyes remained red and slightly damp.

Steam spiraled from the gudong pot, tiny bubbles swirling to the surface of the clear broth. Against this lively backdrop of hard-won mundanity, Mo Ran interlaced his fingers with Chu Wanning’s. “I thought back then, if I lost my bet, I’d wait for you…however many decades it took. If you ascended to immortality, I’d wait hundreds, even thousands of years.”

Chu Wanning found he couldn’t speak.

“The mortal realm is so beautiful. Wanning, I didn’t need you to come to the grave with me.”

A big bubble burst in the pot. Hot liquid splattered onto Chu Wanning’s wrist. A few drops of broth weren’t enough to cause injury, but he instinctively jerked his hand back and lowered his head. Then he thought he ought to be more composed than that, so he steeled his heart and forced himself to look up. He glared across the table at that foolhardy disciple who didn’t know what was good for him.

Mo Ran had to laugh. “What’s wrong? First you glare at me, then you glare at the table.”

Whatever retort Chu Wanning would have made was cut off by the toll of a bell from the Heaven-Piercing Tower, high upon the mountain. The sound echoed over the bustling night market in Wuchang Town. Chu Wanning paled as he realized the hour. "Oh no."

It was time for them to switch…

Chu Wanning studied the man sitting across from him. His expression had just been cheerful, but now his eyes snapped shut. A wave of anxiety washed over Chu Wanning.

Ever since Mo Ran had come back to life, after every third day at midnight, Taxian-jun's consciousness would take hold of his body until the night of the following day. The cognizance soul that had remained in Taxian-jun had been separated from Mo Ran's other souls too long; its consciousness hadn't merged easily with his other self. Although his souls were finally all together, his personality underwent a marked shift every few days.

When Mo Ran opened his eyes again, the quality of the light within them had changed. Slowly, Emperor Taxian-jun raised his handsome face. He was the same person in the same body, yet somehow, his bearing was instantly less wholesome and more dangerous, suffused with latent threat.

Taxian-jun bared his teeth in a devilish smile. "Hmm… It's been three days. Wanning, have you missed this venerable one?"

Chu Wanning stared at him, heart thudding in his chest.

Taxian-jun glanced down at the bowls and chopsticks, at the half-eaten pot of gudong soup. The discerning eye of the erstwhile emperor of the mortal realm fell upon the shabby wooden chairs crowded at the edge of the street and the narrow, greasy table. For Mo-zongshi, these things encapsulated the precious warmth of the human realm. But for Taxian-jun…

"Waiter! Get your ass over to this venerable one!"

"Mo Ran, sit *down*!"

These two sharp shouts startled the diners around them. Everyone turned. "Ah! Wait!" someone called out. "Isn't that Chu-zongshi?"

“Wha? I-is that Mo-xianjun too? Isn’t he supposed to be dead? Someone come rub the cobwebs out of my eyes! I don’t think I’ve gone blind quite yet!”

“You’re not blind—I see him too!”

“Ah!” a girl shrieked. “It really is Mo-xianjun!”

The commotion caught the attention of passersby, drawing more and more eyes. A few recognized them with certainty. Grim-faced, Chu Wanning grabbed Emperor Taxian-jun—who was still shouting “How’s it even possible to eat at such a pathetic little table? Is this some kind of sick joke?”—and summoned his sword. Before any more curious onlookers could gather, he leapt onto Huaisha and fled the chaos.

Not until they were high in the air did Chu Wanning let out a breath of relief. The moonlight was crisp and lovely, and the calamity had passed. All was well—save for Taxian-jun grumbling irascibly behind him. “What’s so great about Mo-xianjun? Insolent brats! Why do they only remember Mo-xianjun?”

Chu Wanning didn’t bother to reply.

“It was this venerable one who repaired the Xuanwu barrier!” Taxian-jun raged. “And it was this venerable one who stopped the flood! It was this venerable one who saved all their sorry asses!”

Finally, Chu Wanning glanced over his shoulder at the seething man behind him. Was he really so petty as to be jealous of *himself*?

Noticing Chu Wanning’s amused gaze, Taxian-jun was at first taken aback, then narrowed his eyes. “What do you think you’re looking at?” Feigning indifference, he huffed out, “Even you—you belong to this venerable one too!”

He grabbed Chu Wanning around the waist. Caught off guard, Chu Wanning snapped, “Watch it!” The sword wobbled beneath their feet.

Taxian-jun flicked a finger, stabilizing it with demonic energy. He wrapped his arms tighter around Chu Wanning, tucking his gold-embroidered black cloak around them. “What’re you scared of?” He scoffed in deep displeasure. “With this venerable one here, how could you possibly fall?”

He urged the sword upward and onward. High in the moonlit sky, the sword streaked toward Nanping Mountain like a black whirlwind. Wrapped in the dark night, they were just like any other pair of lovers. They went home.

In time to come, people would occasionally catch glimpses of Mo-zongshi and Chu-zongshi throughout the jianghu. But they always came and went without a trace, like a pair of graceful shadows.

Later still, another legend began to circulate throughout the cultivation realm, of a blind doctor who traveled the land. He appeared always in a bamboo hat and veil, obscuring his face from view. All anyone knew for certain was that his healing abilities were unsurpassed. He traveled to the most barren and destitute regions, treating anyone who sought him out without taking a single copper of payment.

One story about this doctor was particularly well-known. A group of youths in Wuchang Town had been kidnapped by cultivators as children. Their skin had been burned off, and they were made to resemble pixiu. It was practically impossible to reverse the damage done. When this traveling doctor came to Wuchang Town and heard their plight, he cut the flesh from his own arm to make medicine and used it to nurse those youths back to health. The grateful residents of the town had begged to learn his name, but the doctor replied, *I'm merely a sinner, nothing more*.

Many more years passed. That great battle fought in another world faded into an old tale recorded in yellowing scrolls. The children from those days had grown tall as weeds, the youths were rearing families of their own, and the heroes were growing silvered at the temples.

Once again, winter gave way to spring.

Xue Ziming, the leader of Sisheng Peak, had taken a young disciple under his wing, whom he'd raised as if he were his own son. The little boy felt at home from the start, fearless even before the distinguished Sect Leader Xue. He trailed behind Xue Meng day in and day out, asking any question that popped into his head.

One day, Xue Meng's disciple ran over to him. "Shizun, I heard a lot of things about what Shizu and Shishu[1] did in the past. Does Shizun…still talk to them these days?"

Xue Ziming, the foremost leader of the cultivation realm, stood next to the window, gazing at the peach blossoms outside. “Once in a while,” he responded.

His little disciple was practically vibrating with interest. “Then why don’t you invite them back here?” Without waiting for Xue Meng’s answer, the disciple chattered on, “The Red Lotus Pavilion and Shishu’s disciple quarters are still empty. No one else has ever lived there.” He tugged on Xue Ziming’s broad sleeve. “Shizun, Shizun, why don’t you invite them back? I’ve listened to lots of storytellers talking about them—they all say Shizu and Shishu are great heroes…”

Xue Meng fastened a pair of light brown eyes on his disciple. In the spring sunshine, he seemed to be hiding a smile beneath his stern expression. “Do you want to be a hero someday too?”

“Of course!” The little disciple puffed out his cheeks, full of determination. “How could Shizun’s disciple be anything less than outstanding? I’m gonna do a bunch of really important things!”

“Being outstanding doesn’t only mean doing important things,” Xue Meng pointed out. “If you can live a righteous life, without taking advantage of the weak or bowing to the strong, without growing arrogant in good times or losing hope when times are hard; if you can carefully and thoughtfully consider the people and events you encounter, choosing mercy whenever you can; if you can stay true to yourself and your principles—then, by the time you’re an old man, you’d be a great hero.”

Silence.

“Is something wrong?”

When Xue Meng turned to check on his little disciple, he saw him stifling a yawn. He was still very young, after all.

Noticing his teacher’s eyes on him, the disciple snapped his mouth shut. Tears of weariness gathered in the corners of his eyes, but he straightened up and nodded contemplatively. This sort of overcompetitive behavior was so reminiscent of a certain son of the phoenix in his youth, Xue Meng held back a laugh. Putting on a serious expression, he asked, “Will you remember that?”

“I will,” his disciple said quickly.

“Did you understand it?” asked Xue Meng.

“I…” His disciple sounded a little downcast. “I didn’t…” A pause. “Shizun,” he said plaintively, “what you said is too complicated.”

Xue Meng didn’t blame him. After thinking for a moment, he patted the boy on the head. “Forget it. It was too much.”

The disciple giggled.

“If you want to be a hero, you have to remember one thing.”

The boy stood at attention, as though Xue Meng was about to teach him some unbeatable move or reveal a deep secret. His bright eyes opened wide.

The sunshine slanted across Xue Meng’s face. Beneath the dappled shadows of the flowers, he smiled. “The greatest dignity you can give yourself is to refrain from judging others rashly.”

He bent down, scooping the uncomprehending boy up in his arms. Xue Meng walked like this all the way to the end of the garden. From here, they could see the steep summit of the Aaaaah Cliff. The Red Lotus Pavilion was shrouded in mist. From here, they could look down through the floating clouds at the distant towns below, the river winding through them like a ribbon of jade.

The wind blew, taking with it all the little disciple’s tiredness. He was no longer yawning, but he was still so young every flower and bird diverted his attention. Xue Meng stood with him by the carved railing, gazing out at the landscape of Sichuan. “What do you see?”

The boy wasn’t sure what answer he was looking for. “Mountains… buildings…water…and fog…”

Xue Meng listened with a smile. His temperament had steadied over the years. It had been a long time since the days when he lost his temper at the drop of a hat. They looked out at the world below. Where the boy saw buildings, Xue Meng saw the burgeoning prosperity of Wuchang Town at the foot of the mountain. Long ago, it had been a shabby little village, but now, it was a hive of activity, even livelier than the grand cities of the upper cultivation realm had once been.

Where the boy saw water, Xue Meng saw the river of forgetfulness flowing eastward. Sometimes, he could almost see an old monk standing on its banks, a soul-calling lantern in his hand, saying to him solemnly, *Xue-shizhu, on this journey to the underworld…*

Where the boy saw fog, Xue Meng saw the wisps of those departed souls, lingering around Sisheng Peak year-round. His father and mother were among them. He caught glimpses of them everywhere—on the Dancing Sword Platform, in the rear garden, in Mengpo Hall, on Naihe Bridge. He saw them even when he closed his eyes. Perhaps mortals possessed yet another kind of soul in addition to the three ethereal souls and seven corporeal spirits, one that resided in the hearts of those who loved them. Whenever you were missing someone, they would appear at your side.

Xue Meng held his little disciple in his arms and gazed at Frostsky Hall in the distance. Within it, many of his relatives and friends now rested in coffins of black snow. The Jielü Elder had passed from old age during the great snowstorm in early spring of last year. The Xuanji Elder, too, had departed a few years ago. Everyone always said he'd done so many good deeds Yanluo would come for him sooner rather than later, lest he cheat the Lord of Hell by ascending.

Xue Meng had watched his elders leave the world one after another. At first he'd been hysterically distraught, but by now, he was calm—or maybe he'd merely accepted his powerlessness. When he found he was able to arrange the Xuanji Elder's funeral proceedings with ease, Xue Meng couldn't help but reflect on the youth he'd been.

But these were passing thoughts and no more. No longer would he allow himself to become trapped in the mire of the past. He was the sect leader, as well as the Yuheng Elder's disciple. He had to keep his eyes on the road ahead.

"Shizun?" A small hand waved before his face, summoning Xue Meng back from his reverie. "Shizun, what are you thinking about?"

"The past," said Xue Meng, smiling.

The boy's earlier enthusiasm was instantly rekindled. "About Shizu and Shishu?" he asked eagerly.

"Actually, they return every New Year's Eve," said Xue Meng. "You can meet them this year."

His disciple pouted, looking unsatisfied. "But why do they only come on New Year's Eve? Why don't they stay? I heard Shishu is super powerful—with one stroke of his sword—"

Xue Meng poked him in the forehead. "Your head would be gone."

The boy stuck out his tongue, not scared in the least.

"Really," Xue Meng said very seriously. "Your shishu can be a little… What's the word… Unpredictable."

"Huh? Unpredictable?"

Xue Meng nodded. “I’ll introduce you to him this year. But you can only stay until midnight.”

“Why?” the boy asked, eyes growing wide.

“After that, you have to leave…unless you want to call him ‘Your Majesty,’” said Xue Meng.

“Um…” the boy blinked. This answer hadn’t cleared anything up at all. But before he could ask another question, Xue Meng seemed to recall something he’d rather have forgotten. He put the boy down and kneaded at his brow, as though afflicted with an awful headache.

It was the first time the boy had ever seen his shizun look so distressed. He grew even more interested in this “unpredictable” shishu who was the subject of so many stories. “Shizun, Shizun,” he wheedled, “is Shishu—”

“That’s enough questions.”

“Then is Shizu…”

“No more.”

“So Shizu and Shishu…”

“Go back to your room and copy your books!”

“Wah, Shizun, you’re so scary…”

It was a crisp, clear day in Sichuan. The pristine sunlight scattered through the branches onto this master and disciple. The breeze picked up, ruffling Xue Meng’s robes and caressing the little boy’s rounded cheeks. It blew past the majestic buildings of Sisheng Peak, past the jade-green grass growing up before the gravestones of heroes.

The wind swept over the vast lands, swirling across the world in an instant. It brushed past a charitable blind doctor, past twins admiring plum blossoms in a field of snow. It brushed past a woman who raised a cup to Dragonsoul Pool on Mount Jiao, past lovers nestled within the quiet of Nanping Valley. These places remained unchanged by its passage, serene and calm.

People’s paths would cross and diverge again; they might walk alongside each other for miles, or part and meet again by pure

happenstance. Thus did the fates of countless people collide and intertwine. It was impossible to stop time on a night of drunken merriment or linger forever within a beautiful dream. But everyone carried the shadows their family, friends, and lovers had left upon their heart. It mattered not if they were dead or alive, or if they'd ever meet again. Those shadows would follow them like their own, wherever they chose to go.

The wind whispered past the haitang tree in front of the Heaven-Piercing Tower. Its branches were laden with flowers, just like in years past. The long night was over, and everywhere in this sprawling world were places one could call home. All was at peace.

Xue Meng looked up at the lofty mountain peak, at the stately tower. Some memory seemed to stir in him, and he broke into a smile. Taking his little disciple's hand, he set out across the grounds of the world's foremost sect toward Loyalty Hall. He seemed to hear the song another shizun and his disciple had once played beneath the Heaven-Piercing Tower, back when he'd first taken up the sect leader's mantle. That melody drifted through the long river of time, dispersing like snow behind the Sect Leader Xue of this year, this day—

I visit old friends with the bright moon on high, faces red beneath the lanternlight. The young phoenix crows to greet the spring dawn over leagues of mountains and rivers at peace. Save the wine you hid in our youth, for your brother will return to see you in time.

We needn't remain always so close at hand—whenever I miss you, I'll send the east wind.

— The End —

Chapter 312:
Returning to Live in the South

— Two years after the final battle —[2]

THE SCENT of congee filled the small cottage.

A young child, pointed ears sticking out from under the pumpkin leaf hat he was wearing, huddled close to the stove as he added fresh wood to the flames. Next to him sat a red-headed girl, chewing on some candy as she stared into the fire.

"Add more."

"No way. Any more and it's going to scorch."

"I don't think it's gonna."

"As if you'd know! All you know is how to eat sweets."

Chu Wanning strode in carrying a brace of wild rabbits, the spoils of his hunt. On his heels came a gaggle of round little grass spirits, flower fae, and even tiny moss sprites no bigger than a fingernail. The tree spirit siblings in front of the stove shot to their feet, scrambling to greet him with a bow. "Sacred Tree-xianjun."

Sacred Tree-xianjun was what all these little wood elemental spirits called Chu Wanning. In his past life, he'd always wondered why he had such a natural affinity with Jiuge and such powerful control over grass- and wood-type energy. Not to mention the strange incident with the Gourd of Debauchery that had escaped from the Golden Drum Tower, who'd been so deferential to him. Only in hindsight had he connected all these little clues. He was created from the Flame Emperor's sacred tree, and the Flame Emperor was the progenitor of all the world's flora.

After the final battle, Chu Wanning and Mo Ran had gone into seclusion in Nanping Valley. Grand destructive techniques were currently of no use to them, yet their days had become a little *too* ordinary. To enliven

things, Chu Wanning created a spell to summon some wood-elemental spirits, assembling a small army of Nanping Valley's spritelings.

"You're quite the little warlord," Mo Ran had commented with a laugh. "All you're missing is a tiger-skin rug to adorn your floor."

Chu Wanning hadn't deigned to respond. After all, this was merely the envious jibe of someone with no summoning abilities of his own.

Over the past few days, however, the warlord Chu Wanning had found himself rather anxious. Xue Meng had announced he'd be paying a visit to Nanping Valley to celebrate the Mid-Autumn Festival with them. The distance of the past two years had eroded much of the awkwardness between the trio, and so Chu Wanning was naturally eager to reunite with his beloved disciple. In the month leading up to the Mid-Autumn Festival, he'd begun to meticulously plan the dishes he would prepare for Xue Ziming's visit.

"Whatcha writing, Shizun?"

Candlelight flickered as Mo Ran came up behind Chu Wanning and enveloped him in his arms, chin coming to rest on his shoulder. His dark eyes fell upon the brush and paper on the table. The answer was immaterial; his true goal was to coax his savior-gege into bed before the hour grew too late. After all, what could Chu Wanning be writing? Most likely he was sketching blueprints for another Holy Night Guardian, which he would send along to Master Ma of Taobao Estate to manufacture and sell cheaply, along with a sincere note directing him to pay all profits to Sisheng Peak. In the end, the manufacturing costs would exceed the sale price per unit, and Master Ma would take his losses to Xue Ziming to seek compensation.

"Mn? Not working on blueprints today?"

"Inspiration doesn't strike every single day," Chu Wanning answered absently.

"Shizun…" Mo Ran nuzzled his cheek against Chu Wanning's and dropped a kiss on his earlobe.

"What is it?"

Mo Ran straightened up and rubbed at his nose. He'd become increasingly worried lately that Chu Wanning was beginning to tire of him.

Why else would Mo Ran's affectionate nosing be met with such a flat *What is it*, without even the slightest inflection to soften it? What in the ever-loving hell?

Only now did Mo Ran finally focus on the words beneath Chu Wanning's brush. Perhaps it'd have been better if he hadn't—what he saw shocked him so badly he took a step back. "What are you writing?!"

What had been an idle question was now a horrified exclamation.

Hearing the alarm in Mo Ran's tone, Chu Wanning paused and lifted his gaze. His phoenix eyes were narrowed dangerously; not even the soft curtain of his lashes hid the sharpness of his glare. But that deadly stare inspired only half the terror of his next words: "A Mid-Autumn Festival menu, of course."

Mo Ran fell into a long, horrified silence.

It was like this: In honor of this reunion dinner with the disciple he felt he'd let down—their first since the great battle—the Beidou Immortal was writing a menu with his own two hands.

As Mo Ran gazed at Chu Wanning's resolute expression in the candlelight, a tremor went through his heart. Surely…Chu Wanning wasn't being serious?

Unfortunately, Chu-xianjun had always been very serious, and he was being serious now as well. Over the next few days, he carefully perused his draft menu with knitted brows, at times striking out an item (whereupon Mo Ran would breathe a sigh of relief), at others adding in more (whereupon Mo Ran would feel a faint spasm in his stomach).

Chu Wanning cleared his throat and brought the final menu to Mo Ran for his perusal. Mo Ran, holding onto his composure with an iron grip, scanned the list of dishes—ten cold, ten hot—before closing the bamboo scroll.

"What is it? Are there not enough dishes?"

"No." Mo Ran realized he had to step in to restrain his savior-gege or risk Sisheng Peak's new sect leader meeting an untimely end at mid-autumn. After some consideration, he raised his gaze to meet Chu

Wanning's and smiled. "I just feel like letting Shizun do all the work will show a lack of sincerity."

"Really?" Chu Wanning furrowed his brow.

"It's a *reunion* dinner, after all." Mo Ran took his hand, gently nudging him toward the idea. "It'd be more festive if everyone was involved, don't you think?" Seeing that Chu Wanning continued to hesitate, Mo Ran—struck by inspiration upon recalling his competitive streak—continued, "How about this, Shizun. You prepare five cold dishes and five hot, and I'll do the same, but neither of us tells the other what he's preparing. When Xue Meng arrives, we'll set all twenty dishes out and ask him which he enjoyed and which he didn't. What do you think?"

Chu Wanning didn't answer immediately, but his eyes lit up. Mo Ran, intimately familiar with the way his catlike lover's mind worked, repressed a smile. He twined his fingers through Chu Wanning's and asked, "Will that do?"

"So a cooking contest?" Chu Wanning lifted his gaze to meet Mo Ran's.

Mo Ran rubbed his nose and answered with a smile, "If you want to think of it that way, sure."

After some consideration, Chu Wanning stood and snatched the bamboo scroll Mo Ran was still holding out of his hand.

"What?" Mo Ran asked, startled.

"I'm not letting you see what I'm making." Chu Wanning's expression was deadly serious. "Forget everything you saw on this list; I'm going to redo it from scratch."

Mo Ran blinked at him helplessly.

"When it comes to cooking, I'm actually just as good as you are." Chu Wanning turned away haughtily, eyes narrowed, but the overall effect was more cute than anything.

"Yes—yes you are." Mo Ran was finding it harder and harder to hide his smile. "Whatever Shizun says is right. I'm looking forward to a feast at the Mid-Autumn reunion dinner." He took Chu Wanning's hand again,

squeezing those fingers calloused from years of working with armor and puppets before bringing them to his mouth to kiss.

It seemed Chu Wanning had expected his words to be met with mockery. In the candle's glow, Mo Ran watched as his eyes widened in surprise, as his raised hackles slowly subsided beneath Mo Ran's tender kisses. Mo Ran lowered his gaze demurely. "Whatever my savior-gege makes is wonderful."

Congratulating himself on cleverly avoiding a crisis—truly, he was growing more quick-witted by the day!—Mo Ran got to his feet as well, still smiling, and began to collect the unwashed dishes on the table.

That night, after Mo Ran had gone to wash up, Chu Wanning sat by the window going over the menu he'd worked on so carefully. When he heard the door opening, he hastily rolled up the scroll. It seemed he'd truly taken the competition to heart and saw Mo Ran as his rival. Mo Ran found him foolishly endearing: This man owned few books that could be considered light reading, and of them, only two were related to food: *Sichuan Recipes* and *Linyi Gastronomy*. What was there to hide?

But Chu Wanning was determined to keep his plans under wraps. He extinguished the candle by the window and asked casually, "Done washing up?" Mo Ran nodded, smiling. Chu Wanning returned the nod with an approving one of his own, and—still casually—shoved his books back onto the shelf. "Good, I'll go wash up then."

Mo Ran's smile widened. "Shizun."

"Hm?" Chu Wanning turned back.

Mo Ran seemed torn on whether or not to continue. Eventually, rubbing at the back of his head, he reminded him, "You've already washed up. You went before me… Remember?"

Chu Wanning froze. Even the mighty Beidou Immortal could slip up while trying to be sneaky.

The moment stretched. Mo Ran, watching him with amused indulgence, leaned over. The space by the window was just wide enough for a chair and a bamboo bookcase; with one hand against the window frame, he'd effectively boxed Chu Wanning in.

But Chu Wanning didn't intend to retreat. He'd gotten better over the years at not pretending he didn't want something when he actually did, but he was still unaccustomed to this kind of open advance. Not to mention, only a few days ago, on one of Taxian-jun's days, the unreasonable madman had quite literally tied him to this very chair and fucked him, a memory that made his cheeks slowly heat. But this only made him more determined to pretend he was unaffected.

"Well? Let's go to bed, then," Chu Wanning said.

Mo Ran leaned closer and bent to steal a kiss from his cool lips. Truth be told, Taxian-jun and Mo-zongshi had the same proclivities—Taxian-jun was merely more upfront with his tastes, while Mo-zongshi was more restrained. The result was the same. Before Chu Wanning could mount any true resistance, he found himself pressed into the chair. In a beat-for-beat reenactment of what had happened with Taxian-jun, Mo-zongshi twitched his fingers and summoned Jiangui to tie Chu Wanning's limbs to the chair's frame.

"Couldn't you pick a more normal place for this?" Chu Wanning ground out.

Mo Ran's long lashes fluttered innocently as he bent and cupped Chu Wanning's cheek. His voice was very warm as he said, "I'm worried you're growing bored of me."

Chu Wanning stared. How did someone doing something so shameless manage to sound like an insecure wife?

But Mo Ran's gaze was sincere as he dropped to one knee in front of Chu Wanning. "Shizun, we've been together for two years, and there's still the rest of our lives ahead of us. If we did the same thing every night, you'd lose interest in me."

"You're plenty interesting." Chu Wanning leveled a glare at him. "Release me. Now."

Mo Ran stayed where he was, half-kneeling before him, gazing soulfully into his eyes.

"Release me." Chu Wanning repeated sternly.

The fierceness of his glare seemed to stab at the young man's fragile, repeatedly patched-over heart. Mo Ran flinched and dropped his gaze, hurt written plainly on his face as he obediently mumbled, "Jiangui, return." As the willow vine obligingly unwound itself, Mo Ran added a meek "Sorry."

Chu Wanning pressed his lips together. Despite being a tall and strapping man, Mo Ran seemed very small indeed as he knelt before Chu Wanning. At times like these, it was hard for Chu Wanning to forget Mo Ran was technically younger than him by a decade, yet was always so indulgent of him. He rubbed at his arms where the willow vines had left their mark, abruptly feeling he'd been too harsh. He cleared his throat, working out what to say, only to hear Mo Ran mumble, head still bowed, "I'm not really conscious of what goes on when I'm Taxian-jun, but…I do get some fragments here and there."

Chu Wanning's hand froze.

From this angle, Mo Ran's lashes looked even longer and thicker than usual, so that he resembled nothing so much as a loyal puppy. Chu Wanning felt like a pair of fluffy ears would emerge from the young man's hair at any moment and droop, matching the dispirited wilting of a fluffy tail that didn't exist.

"I thought you'd enjoy it," Mo Ran continued to mumble. "I guess I was mistaken."

Of course you were mistaken!

Still, he reached out and patted Mo Ran's head. Mo Ran looked up at the affectionate gesture. His handsome face was all the more striking in the soft glow from the candle. The wavering light refracted in the depths of his dark eyes like twinned rivers of stars. But right now those eyes were woebegone, tinged ever so slightly red at the corners.

"I'm sorry, Shizun. I really only meant to make you happy." When Chu Wanning didn't answer, Mo Ran continued, "I messed up and made you mad, didn't I?"

How could Chu Wanning's heart not soften? He sighed, patting him more firmly, but Mo Ran remained where he was, stiffening against the motion. Chu Wanning patted him a few more times, but when that still wasn't enough, he gave in. "Come here."

Mo Ran jerked in surprise. Still kneeling, he obediently leaned in. Chu Wanning cupped the back of his head, tugging him closer until his cheek was pressed against his waist, then stroked his soft, inky hair and sighed. “Dummy.”

Candlelight glimmered in the quiet room. Chu Wanning reached up and tugged at his hair tie. Heedless of the dark hair cascading loosely around his shoulders, he tied the long, lotus-white strip of cloth over his own eyes.

Mo Ran, in a moment of truly dense obliviousness, asked in surprise, “What are you doing, Shizun?”

Even the warm undertones of the candlelight couldn’t hide the flush rising beneath the spring-frost paleness of Chu Wanning’s skin. He compressed his lips. This guy could melt his heart *and* provoke him to fury between one moment and the next. He was so mad it felt like his head might blow off; if it weren’t for the silk blindfold hiding his eyes and mitigating some of his embarrassment, he would’ve shoved Mo Ran aside and stormed out the door.

After grinding his teeth in silence for a long moment, he squeezed out, “Get on with it or fuck off.”

Mo-zongshi was a straightforward man. After a moment of shock, followed by a moment of pleasant surprise, he turned his full attention to the business at hand. Within seconds, Chu Wanning found himself stripped of his clothes, the evening air rippling cool against his skin.

Blindfolded as he was, Chu Wanning couldn’t help lifting his chin, blindly searching for Mo Ran. It was a perilous move on his part, for the lotus-white silk of the hair ribbon resting over his straight nose drew Mo Ran’s gaze down to his lips beneath. Normally, the bright coldness of Chu Wanning’s eyes arrested the viewer’s gaze, trapping it within those icy pools. But now those eyes were hidden, that fierce dignity veiled, and Mo Ran discovered that the features on the lower half of Chu Wanning’s face were gentle, in particular those pale-pink lips. At this moment those lips were unconsciously parted, as if begging to be kissed. Though Mo Ran knew his shizun wasn’t doing it on purpose, he kissed him anyway.

Even as he was exploring Chu Wanning’s mouth, his hands continued moving, calloused fingers roaming over Chu Wanning’s waist and chest. By

the time he pulled away, both were breathing hard.

Mo Ran pressed his forehead to Chu Wanning's and asked, voice hoarse, "Is this okay?"

"Huh?" The blindfolded Chu Wanning sat panting, kiss-reddened lips the color of blooming haitang. He looked more alluring than ever.

"Can we do it? Here?"

Mo-zongshi, being in all ways an upright gentleman, was always careful to check in with Chu Wanning before continuing. At times, Chu Wanning felt this proactive, consent-seeking behavior was more humiliating than any shameless thing Taxian-jun could ever do. He snapped, "You've already stripped me naked and *now* you're asking for permission?"

"Ah…" Mo Ran's face had gone pink, though Chu Wanning couldn't see. Realizing the inanity of his question, he pressed his lips together in embarrassment and pecked Chu Wanning on the cheek. "Sorry."

All he got in reply was a huff.

Mo Ran generously said nothing more to humiliate him. His eyelashes, soft as a butterfly's wings, fluttered against Chu Wanning's skin as he pressed kiss after kiss down his nose, his neck, his collarbones, his chest… He could feel the tension in Chu Wanning's body, could see the white-knuckled grip he had on the arms of the chair. Mo Ran knew Chu Wanning didn't enjoy him touching his chest; though the scar there no longer hurt, it still felt vulnerable. So after placing a delicate kiss on one nipple, Mo Ran pulled back and settled between Chu Wanning's parted legs. He lifted his head to take in the sight of his lover, still rigid with nerves, then bent lower. His breath washed over where Chu Wanning was already beginning to harden.

"Ah…" Chu Wanning bit back a moan. Though his eyes were covered, he turned away in heated shame. The shock of Mo Ran's hot, wet mouth around his cock was made more vivid by his blindness, as if all his senses had narrowed down to this. The feel of it ran along his spine like fireworks, sparking all the way down to his toes. Chu Wanning tipped his head back and choked back a startled gasp. Even so, the twitch of his hardening cock betrayed him. Kneeling between his legs, Mo Ran took him deeper into his throat, tongue pressing against his tip then moving languidly

along his length. When he pulled back, Chu Wanning's cock was spit-slick all the way down.

"Savior-gege…"

Chu Wanning's face went redder by a few shades. He hissed, "Stop calling me that."

"Okay." Mo Ran huffed out a laugh. His lips were still against Chu Wanning's cock, and each word puffed hot against sensitive skin. "Whatever Shizun says."

Chu Wanning gritted his teeth, unable to decide if the humiliation of *Shizun* was worse than the awkwardness of *Savior-gege*. He didn't have long to consider before Mo Ran's mouth began its onslaught anew. He couldn't see a thing; all he could do was sit there and take it, lips parting around ragged gasps. Yet his imagination filled in the gaps, painting a picture of Mo Ran kneeling between his legs, his skillful tongue lapping at him.

The next time Mo Ran pulled back, Chu Wanning couldn't help reaching out to run his fingers through Mo Ran's dark hair. He said in a shaky voice, "Okay, that's quite enough."

Mo Ran paid him no mind. Chu Wanning always put on a tough act, even in bed. When he said *that's enough*, it was often far from it. Since they'd gone into seclusion, Mo Ran had taken him at his word the first few times, only for Chu Wanning to tear badly. Each time found Mo Ran staring at the blood-spotted sheets in a guilty daze afterward. He had long learned not to take Chu Wanning's *that's enough* at face value.

Thus Mo Ran blithely ignored him. He reached up to catch the hand that was attempting to push him away and twined their fingers together. He moved lower, running his tongue over Chu Wanning's balls, then even further down. He paused and lifted eyes glazed with arousal. "Shizun… scoot forward a little, please. I can't reach."

His words were polite, but they made Chu Wanning feel like steam was coming from his ears.

Seeing that Chu Wanning neither moved forward nor shoved him away, Mo Ran unwound their fingers and took hold of his hips, tugging him

closer to the edge of the chair before proceeding to spread Chu Wanning's legs wider.

"Ah!"

His next lick was directly on his entrance. The sensation was more intense than before; Chu Wanning cried out and flung his head back, bracing himself against the back of the chair. He could feel every swipe of Mo Ran's tongue against the sensitive skin there, feeling it press wetly against and into him. Chu Wanning was torn—on the one hand, this act was too filthy for him to accept, but at the same time, a tender warmth bloomed in his chest. The surety of being loved wholly and completely, every inch of him accepted and laved with affection, made him feel like he was sinking into warm spring waters.

By the time Mo Ran hoisted him up and swapped their positions, Chu Wanning's legs had gone numb with pleasure. Straddling Mo Ran, he could feel that terrifying length pressed against him. Mo Ran kept one arm looped around Chu Wanning's waist while the other worked between his thighs to finger him open. When Chu Wanning, brow furrowed, said "That's enough" for the ninth time that night, Mo Ran laughed and pressed a kiss to his temple.

"Okay."

No amount of preparation would ever make penetration by such a massive cock completely painless. Chu Wanning knit his brows, tremors rolling down his spine as Mo Ran entered him, inch by excruciating inch. When he was fully seated, a groan escaped both of them with that final stretch.

"Shizun, does it hurt?"

"…Want to swap and find out?"

Mo Ran shut his mouth and instead began to rock his hips. Like Taxian-jun, he was prone to losing control once in the throes of pleasure, but their styles and techniques were a study in contrasts before that point. Mo Ran was measured and careful as he moved inside Chu Wanning. The expression of restrained passion on his handsome face only added to his sensuality. With each thrust, he could feel Chu Wanning clenching hot around his cock, a maddening pleasure. He had to exert all his self-control

to tame the impulse to press the man in his arms down and fuck him senseless. His breathing came fast and hard, his eyes glittering like freshly polished gems as arousal burned through him.

Sweat traced lines down his bare skin as the heady musk of sex filled the room. Each breath came heavier and more ragged than the last; these restrained rocking motions were insufficient to slake his lust. He shifted the angle to thrust the head of his cock against that familiar, sensitive spot within Chu Wanning and was instantly rewarded: Soft, breathy moans spilled from Chu Wanning's lips. That he was so clearly trying to stifle them made them all the more seductive.

Captivated, Mo Ran moved unthinkingly to catch Chu Wanning's mouth in a kiss. The wet slide of their tongues against each other awakened an insatiable hunger, and he kissed him with a sloppy fervor, hips picking up speed to match.

Seated astride Mo Ran, teased mercilessly by the steady roll of his hips, Chu Wanning felt he was about to go mad. Mo Ran was so gentle, so careful, but his tenderness was a cruel torment. Mo Ran knew Chu Wanning's body better than he knew it himself—that ceaseless press against his most sensitive spot, at a pace that was unrelenting yet without force, was the most exquisite torture, an ever-heightening pleasure with no climax in sight. It was like having an itch he could only scratch around, feather-light, without ever receiving true relief. Under this onslaught, it was all he could do to let out a strangled, broken moan, almost—but not quite—a plea. He felt himself getting hotter and slicker where their bodies joined, felt how his body clung to Mo Ran's, sucking him in deeper…

His ears burned. He dragged his mind away from that line of thought. At least Mo Ran wasn't like Taxian-jun, who seemed addicted to wringing tears and wails of pleasure from Chu Wanning in bed. Or rather, Mo Ran *did* enjoy it, but not to that extent.

Mo Ran, sensing Chu Wanning beginning to adjust to the pleasure, added more force to his thrusts. He drove ceaselessly into Chu Wanning, groping and squeezing his buttocks. Lust-hazed eyes fixed hungrily on his lover, he asked, "Shizun, does it feel good?"

As if Chu Wanning would respond to a question like that—but his body answered for him. Chu Wanning's fine shivers, his shuddering gasps

for breath, the fragmented moans that escaped his slack mouth were answer enough. Mo Ran obligingly picked up the pace. What had started as tender lovemaking became more and more frenzied, until they were fucking hard and rough, the slick sounds of their bodies colliding synchronizing with the creaks of protest from the chair beneath them.

At last Chu Wanning was unable to endure any more. He could barely hold himself upright, his body plastered to Mo Ran's muscled chest beneath him. "S-slow down…"

But the exhortation came too late; Mo Ran was too far gone in pleasure to be obedient any longer. He kept up his merciless pace until Chu Wanning came untouched, splattering his release across Mo Ran's stomach as Mo Ran continued to buck his hips.

Mo Ran glanced up. The blindfold had been tugged askew by the vigor of their movements, revealing half-lidded phoenix eyes and damp lashes. The sight seemed to send a bolt through him; he shoved to his feet, scooping up his lover in his arms. The change of position drove him even deeper into Chu Wanning, still in the throes of his climax. Caught off guard by the sudden jolt of pleasure, Chu Wanning cried out.

"Shizun… Wanning… Baby…" Mo Ran tumbled them both onto the bed, peppering his face with kisses. As they shifted, his cock slipped out of Chu Wanning's slick, quivering hole. Chu Wanning's eyes were glassy; his climax magnified every sensation, and all he could sense right now was that his entrance was shamelessly clenching down on nothing, aching to be filled. With a low moan, he raised trembling fingers to pull away the slipping blindfold, revealing phoenix eyes tinged red at their upswept corners and sheened with tears. With one look, they seemed to pierce Mo Ran's heart.

Swearing, Mo Ran lifted Chu Wanning's legs and pressed his hot, hard cock against Chu Wanning's entrance. The slightest pressure was enough to push the head in, drawing a muffled groan of pain and pleasure from the man beneath him. Unable to hold back a moment longer, Mo Ran mumbled "Sorry" before lifting Chu Wanning's hips and driving the rest of the way in.

What followed was almost animalistic in its frenzy. Once lost in pleasure, Taxian-jun and Mo-zongshi were very alike indeed. Rationality

flew out the window, leaving only raw need, the desire to drag moan after shattered moan out of his lover.

Their leanly muscled bodies tangled passionately on the bed. Mo Ran pulled back merely to push Chu Wanning's legs further apart, his hips never stilling, cock buried to the hilt with every thrust. Broken pants and whines filled the room. Chu Wanning felt like he was being swept away beneath the onslaught, each press of Mo Ran against that tender spot like a fresh burst of rain sweeping him further and further out to sea. Everything was slipping out of his control; all he could cling to was the man in front of him, his expression of complete adoration Chu Wanning's last tether to reality.

What remained of Mo Ran's restraint unraveled as he edged closer to climax. His last few thrusts were so fierce, so forceful, that it was almost as if he wanted to shove himself all the way in, balls and all. He came deep inside Chu Wanning, holding nothing back as he filled him to the brim. Chu Wanning was almost insensible with pleasure, so overstimulated that the tips of his toes trembled and his eyes lost focus.

It took a long while for Mo Ran to gather himself. "Feeling okay? Did I hurt you?" He pressed tender kisses to Chu Wanning's sweat-damp brow, his mouth, his nose. "Was it good?"

Exhausted, Chu Wanning turned to face him, feeling warmth pool in his chest at the sincere, gentle expression on Mo Ran's face. This was the face of the man he'd once lost, the man who'd once plunged into the underworld for him, the man whose body had once grown cold beside his own. Now he was right before his eyes, right next to him, still *within* him after their fervent lovemaking.

Chu Wanning let his eyes fall shut, unable to name the emotion rising bitter at the back of his throat. But an answering sweetness rose in his heart, welling like spring water to mingle with the bitterness, drowning out his voice. Honest self-expression was not Chu Wanning's strong suit. When it came to matters of the bedroom, he couldn't be counted on to give a straightforward response, what with that thin skin of his. There was no way he would answer Mo Ran's bumbling questions—not in words at least.

His answer, though, was better than any words could be. Chu Wanning raised his head. Beneath the sweat-tangled hair clinging to his forehead, his eyes were gentle as they traced the handsome lines of Mo

Ran's face. He leaned in and placed a kiss on the sweet curve of Mo Ran's lips. The hand he laid on Mo Ran's chest rested over a scar the twin of his own. Though the wounds had healed, the scars remained, relics of their pasts.

"I love you." Chu Wanning's voice was very soft. Then, as if to hide his embarrassment, he yanked him in for another kiss.

There was no way the night would end here. Mo Ran's brush with demonic energy seemed to have granted him even greater stamina—an alarming development, considering his prodigious stamina before. He flipped Chu Wanning over and onto his knees, pulling his hips up and plastering himself to Chu Wanning's back. Mo Ran held him in place, stifling Chu Wanning's cries with a hand over his mouth as he fucked him from behind. Their bed creaked beneath their enthusiastic lovemaking, the sound echoing through Nanping Valley. Spend from Mo Ran's last climax was pushed from Chu Wanning's hole with each thrust, dripping sticky down the backs of his thighs, and his tousled hair spread over the bedding as he was held down and fucked within an inch of his life.

"Wanning…"

Chu Wanning heard Mo Ran calling for him as if from a distance, his voice thick with love, desire, adoration, need. He opened his mouth to respond, but his throat was hoarse from crying out; no sound emerged. He turned his head, cheek pressed into the sheets with each rock of Mo Ran's hips.

Mo Ran's hand came into view, covering the back of his own. His breath was heavy in Chu Wanning's ear, hitching as he came again with a cut-off moan. The sound seemed to burrow into Chu Wanning's bones. His brows knit in pleasure as he felt Mo Ran release in him once more. His lover's lips moved against the sweat-kissed hair at his temples, his voice steeped in tenderness. "Wanning, I love you."

They were words he'd said many times over the past two years, yet the way he said it seemed like a declaration of intent: He would keep on saying it, over and over, for the rest of their lives. No, not just *seemed*—it *was* a declaration.

I love you. From dawn till dusk, in every moment in between, I'll love you. Every day for the rest of our lives, I'll love you. In this lifetime and the

next, I'll love you forever.

As for the reunion dinner at the Mid-Autumn Festival…

Though Chu Wanning's cooking skills left much to be desired, he did possess working tastebuds. After countless hours of research and several trials in the kitchen proved futile, and seeing the way Mo Ran bustled about prepping and seasoning and marinating with practiced ease, Chu Wanning finally gave up trying to make his dishes by himself three days before the Mid-Autumn Festival.

And thus, we return to the scene from the beginning, where a dozen-odd grass and wood-elemental spirits and fae clustered around Chu Wanning. Some he assigned to chop wood, others he set to stoke the fire; a few were tasked with prepping ingredients, and a select number would do the actual cooking. Chu Wanning checked on the soup bubbling over the fire. Seeing that it looked and smelled as it should, he turned to the two little spirits attending to it and said, "My thanks to you both."

"No need to thank us!" the tree sprite said with a smile. "When Sacred Tree-xianjun calls for help, we're more than happy to lend a hand."

Chu Wanning took a peek outside the cottage. On the other side of the courtyard, he could see Mo Ran diligently chopping firewood. His tanned skin was sheened with sweat, glistening beads chasing each other down the curve of his jaw. His clothing did nothing to hide his firm chest nor the taut muscle of his lean waist.

Truly a beauty beyond compare.

Unfortunately for this beauty, Chu Wanning's drive to win overrode anything else. He'd sneakily summoned these fae and spirits to help prepare for the feast, knowing full well it was cheating. If anything, this was what Mo Ran deserved for spending every night tormenting him in bed. Newly motivated to get his revenge, Chu Wanning shut the kitchen door firmly and placed a barrier that would prevent Mo Ran from entering. This done, he turned back to his army of summoned spirits and picked up his menu from the table.

"Next, we're going to make sweet-and-sour squirrel fish… Who here knows how to fish?"

The Beidou Immortal's voice drifted from the kitchen, faint and indistinct. Once in a while, there came answering squeaks and chirps from the spritelings in their strange language. Smoke rose in spirals from the chimney, carrying the fragrance of cooking throughout the valley and dissipating in the golden glow of sunset. On this tranquil evening, the memory of that cold winter's night in Nanping Valley all those years ago seemed very far away. Perhaps with time, all the suffering and agony they'd endured would fade as well. Much like an ink stain might remain on a sleeve after one wash, even two, yet with the passage of time, would leave no more than the faintest trace of shadow.

For the rest of their lives, as the seasons turned in Nanping Valley, spring warming into summer, autumn cooling into winter, each change would bring for Mo Ran and Chu Wanning nothing but the most beautiful days.

The Only Possibility

Chapter 1

— Modern AU Parody —

I thought I was playing a dating sim with multiple routes, but it turned out to only have one ending.

—Excerpt from Xue Meng's Mission Failure Report

XUE MENG had reached the second-to-last piece of coconut red bean pudding on the plate. It was delicate work; he slid the plastic spoon along the edge with measured precision, his hand steady. He'd wanted to keep the pudding as pristine as possible, but it'd already been unfortunately tainted by the mango mousse sharing the plate.

He hated mango the same way he hated his job at the Cultivation World Protection Bureau. But what choice did he have? This was the twenty-first century; even stupid sons from cultivator families had to earn a living.

"Mission report, Mr. Xue." A tinny mechanical voice came in through his headphones.

Xue Meng rolled his eyes. Ever since the Space-Time Maintenance Bureau had sent that new guy—Jiang-something—to be their chief, mission reports had become one of his mandatory daily tasks.

He cleared his throat. "This morning I arrived at eight-twenty sharp. Breakfast was takeout from Li-shifu's, pan-fried steamed buns. They were pretty good; you should try them sometime if you get the chance. More importantly, the old guy running the stall is nice and gives great compliments. He calls those sixty-year-old aunties 'li'l lass' without blinking. Anyway, after I finished breakfast I started rubber-stamping—"

This was why Xue Meng despised his job. Yes. Rubber-stamping.

It was a long story, but, in brief, the blame fell on his old man. Xue Meng's dad Xue Zhengyong was the Director of the Office of International Cultivation Affairs, and as the director's precious only son, Xue Meng had been spoiled rotten since before he could walk. Everything he used or ate was specially supplied by the Office of Cultivation. Even his diapers were made from textiles woven by the deep-sea mermaid tribe—guaranteed to be silky, breathable, and rash-free. Cloth diapers like Pampers or Merries? Perish the thought; his parents would never subject their baby boy's bum to such pedestrian brands.

A nepo baby like this obviously had no trouble finding a job. He took a position at the Cultivation World Protection Bureau as soon as he graduated, and the chief had personally come down to welcome him on his first day. At the time, the chief was a man named Nangong Liu. He was a rotund middle-aged man, the kind that'd start sweating if he had to climb even two flights of stairs.

Nangong Liu had solicitously taken little Intern Xue's hand, jowls quivering as he introduced himself. "Aiya, is this Xue Meng? You look just like your dad! I knew you were his flesh and blood the second I clapped eyes on you. So handsome!"

"Thank you, Uncle."

Nangong Liu chuckled. "Your dad and I are old friends; let's not waste time on pleasantries. Come on, Uncle will explain what you'll be doing here."

As a new grad, Xue Meng had been full of grand ambitions; he'd made up his mind to do his own small part in building a better world. "I'm ready to hear it," he said cheerfully. "I'll definitely do my best!"

Would you look at that! What a good, sweet boy—no sign of a trust fund disciple's ego at all.

Chief Nangong gave him a meaningful glance, then his smile disappeared. "Xiao-Xue, the bureau knows you're from a noble cultivation family and excel at everything you try your hand at. Even though you're Director Xue's darling son, we've decided to give you the hardest and most miserable work."

The prospect set Xue Meng alight. “Ever since I was a kid, I’ve loved a challenge, but nobody ever let me do anything because of my dad.” His eyes were sparkling. “Bring it on.”

Chief Nangong patted him on the shoulder and gave him a thumbs-up. “An ambitious lad.”

“What will I be doing, then?”

Nangong Liu cleared his throat. “Frankly, it’s a position no one else in the bureau can handle. It requires patience, sharp judgment, and the ability to think on your feet—thousands of lives rest upon every one of your decisions. Your work will bring hope to countless living things, but your choices may bring doom to others.”

His manner was very grave, his eyes shining as if a divine halo was going to begin blazing about his head. “This is hard work that’ll put you on the front lines. When you first said you wanted to join the Space-Time Bureau, your dad asked me over and over again to find you a comfortable, easy job—but after one look at your resume, I could see you were a good kid with plenty of ambition. How could I let that youthful passion go to waste? I thought long and hard before assigning you this role.”

He prodded Xue Meng on the chest. “Make sure you do right by those thousands of lives.”

Xue Meng’s eyes welled with tears of respect, so moved was he by this speech. “Chief, thank you for placing your faith in me! Don’t listen to what my dad said; I’ll give it my all! I’ll exceed your expectations!”

Chief Nangong Liu eyed him approvingly. “Do your best!” he said, and away he swept, puffed up with pride.

That day, new grad Xue Meng went home in a state of unrestrained joy. He sneakily went on Taobao CMall and ordered a whole load of things, specifically:

Broken DPS Crispy Fried Chicken [Hanlin Pharmaceuticals Inc.]: Grants a 10× buff to spiritual energy for two hours. Cannot be used during combat.

Back2(ha)Life [Yuheng Inc.]: Ineffective if used when already dead.

Glow [Wubei Temple & Co.]: Lights up your head to illuminate the darkness for your teammates.

Wacktaid [Taxian-jun Pharmaceuticals]: Ends berserker state.

Organic Free-Range Copium [Tanlang Medical]: Only to be used on enemies.

And just like that, new grad Xue Meng was ready for anything his new job could throw at him. That night, he dreamed he'd transmigrated into Cultivation World War II—his heroic sacrifice stopped the black magic on the European front, and as he collapsed to a bolt of mysterious green light, he heard someone screaming *Avada Kedavra*…

However, the next morning, when Xue Meng marched into the office ready for war, he froze.

"*This* is my job?!"

The executive assistant, a long-legged and buxom young lady, poured him a cup of tea. "That's right," she said sweetly. "Mr. Xue, this is your job."

Xue Meng stared in disbelief at his desk, taking in the mountains of project proposals on his desk. His jaw slowly dropped.

He picked up the topmost sheet and skimmed its contents. A line of bright red text jumped out at him. The name of the project was extremely long and convoluted—no normal person would understand it at first glance.

Memo on the Accountability and Post-Incident Handling of the Illegal Use of Guyueye Faepig Feed by Mortals from Shandong and Linyi.

Memo on *what*?

Xue Meng's head was spinning, but he braced himself and read on.

The Drug Control Administration (DCA) has recently received reports of cultivators selling expired Guyueye faepig feed to civilian businessmen through illegal channels. More than eight thousand bags of expired pig feed have entered the market. Pigs from at least thirty farms

have consumed this fodder; as of writing this, the number of impacted pigs has reached four hundred and counting. Addressing this is a top priority.

Xue Meng blinked. He flipped to the next page.

Department of Cultivation World (DCW) Livestock Control (LC) moves to purchase all impacted pork and dispose of it.

DCW Mortal Liaison (ML) seconds the motion to purchase all impacted pork and dispose of it, and moves to include the amendment: to arrest all cultivators involved in illegal trade and take them in for questioning.

DCW Public Relations (PR) seconds both motions and proposes to instruct the Cultivation Broadcasting Network to disseminate information on the ongoing handling of the case.

Chair, Panel for Executive Administration of the Case Outline Committee (PEACOC), Cultivation World Protection Bureau (CWPB):

Xue Meng looked up in confusion, jabbing the white space on the paper. "Why's this blank?"

"It's waiting for your stamp of approval," she explained with a practiced smile.

"But I'm not the…" He read from the paper. "Peaco… Chair of the Panel for Executive Administration of the Case Outline Committee for the Cultivation World Protection Bureau."

But when he looked up and met the assistant's kindly eyes, he couldn't help doubting himself. "…Am I?"

The lady produced a nametag for him, seemingly out of thin air. In crisp block letters, it said: CHAIR, PANEL FOR EXECUTIVE ADMINISTRATION OF THE CASE OUTLINE COMMITTEE, CWPB: XUE MENG, right next to Xue Meng's least favorite ID photo. She pinned it on for him, beaming. "Now you are! Congratulations, Panel Chair!"

She handed him two stamps, one with an O and one with an X.

"Use the O if you agree and the X if you don't." She smiled again. "Please begin."

Xue Meng gawped at her like a fish. There was much he wanted to say and many bad words he wanted to use, but he swallowed them all and said in a shaky voice, "Do I have to be the one to make the decision?"

The lady grinned at him. "Of course not. You can just use both."

Xue Meng needed a fainting couch. "And what happens if I do that?"

"It'll be handed off to the chief's executive assistant."

Xue Meng needed an even bigger fainting couch. "Then what use am I?"

"That's why I personally suggest you only use one stamp at a time," the lady said gently.

Xue Meng could think of nothing to say.

As the days passed, Xue Meng realized how clever Nangong Liu had been with his words. This dumbshit job had him stamping X's and O's on different reports all day like a freaking pile driver, so it did indeed require outstanding patience. But the real reason he needed patience wasn't to make peace with this dull and tedious task—it was to keep himself from charging into Nangong Liu's fucking office and snapping off the chief's shriveled dick!

Technically, Chief Nangong hadn't lied to him. He really was deciding the fates of thousands. One could tell just from the report titles:

Request for the Construction of a Broken DPS Crispy Fried Chicken Farm

Special Exemption Application for Pinocchio to Cultivate Human Form

Special Exemption Application for the Little Mermaid to Cultivate Legs

Retired Guyueye Sect Leader (Esteemed Member of the Old Guard) Files for Lifetime Extension: "I truly want to live for another five hundred

years.”

Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast Research Committee: Proposal to Call for Volunteers with Butterfly-Boned Ancestry to Donate Sperm in Support of Human–Demon Genetic Engineering Efforts

This was work that decided thousands of fates in a matter of minutes.

Xue Meng picked up his X stamp with a scowl of fury and smacked it down on the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast proposal. Righteousness filled him; he felt he’d saved countless little lives. Coldly, he appended his remarks. *Nobody wants to be jizzed in a cup and put in the fridge. Denied.*

He could admit he was simply venting his own frustration—but he hoped this kind of nonsense would annoy the chief enough to get him sent to the front lines. Maybe he’d even be assigned an exorcism mission in the mortal world.

Unfortunately, the chief was not to be swayed. He had no intention of criticizing dear little Committee Chair Xue. Much later, at a party, Xue Meng overheard how his silliness had resulted in the chief’s executive assistant, one Miss Ye Wangxi, working until three in the morning for weeks. He could hear the chief’s son Nangong Si stomping his feet and slamming the desk from several rooms away. “If you make your daughter-in-law work overtime again, I’ll quit tomorrow!”

Xue Meng shrank back in guilt. Once he recovered from his shock, he decided he had to take these reports seriously.

A couple months passed this way. Just as he had finally gotten faster at stamping things and almost forgotten his earlier ambitions, Nangong Liu was ousted for taking fae bribes, losing his cushy role.

A new chief was swiftly instated.

Chief Jiang Xi was cool-headed and efficient, capable of dealing with any task in moments. Even so, it took him over an hour to understand what Xue Meng’s job actually was. Chief Jiang really couldn’t be blamed for this. Nangong Liu had packaged Xue Meng so prettily that it took Chief Jiang half an age to unwrap all the bows and ruffles, peeling off every piece of frippery only to realize they held nothing but hot air.

In short, Xue Meng's job existed only on paper. Even Xiao-Lizi, who slacked off washing dishes in the cafeteria, had a more meaningful role than he did.

Chief Jiang wasn't the type to let a fake job like this continue. He made up his mind to dissolve this "PEACOC Chair" position and give Xue Meng some useful work to do. For about a week, he studied Xue Meng and brainstormed. Finally, he made his decision.

Which brings this story back to the beginning:

"Mission report, Mr. Xue."

"This morning I arrived at eight-twenty sharp. Breakfast was takeout from Li-shifu's, pan-fried steamed buns. They were pretty good; you should try them sometime if you get the chance. More importantly, the old guy running the stall is nice and gives great compliments. He calls those sixty-year-old aunties 'li'l lass' without blinking. Anyway, after I finished breakfast I started rubber-stamping—"

A crackle came through his headphones as Jiang Xi's audio feed cut in. The mechanical AI voice was replaced by Chief Jiang's even more soulless tones.

"Starting today, you no longer need to do rubber-stamping. Take the rest of the day off and see me in my office first thing tomorrow. I have an important mission for you." Jiang Xi paused, then added flatly, "Bring me an order of Li-shifu's pan-fried steamed buns. Extra vinegar."

Xue Meng sputtered.

The Only Possibility:
Chapter 2

THE NEXT MORNING, Xue Meng arrived at Chief Jiang's office and listened to his whole spiel. Realization slowly dawned on him—this time, he'd been given the responsibility of being a pimp.

Xue Meng was deeply displeased. "Why am I either reviewing sperm donation applications or trying to increase the birth rate? Shouldn't you be delegating this to Tinder or Hinge—what the hell does it have to do with me?!"

Chief Jiang had just put another whole steamed bun in his mouth. Though he had impeccable table manners, the breakneck speed at which he ate was terrifying to behold. "For the last time," he said, "you're not a 'pimp.' You're contributing to the cultivation research group's genetic engineering project." He swallowed the last steamed bun and dabbed delicately at his mouth with a handkerchief.

"Listen up," he said, pinning Xue Meng with a stare. "The demon tribes have become more and more active over the past few hundred years. Another war between mortals and demons will likely break out within the next two centuries—we *need* enhanced military capabilities."

Xue Meng rolled his eyes. "You mean you need offspring from special-phenotype Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts."

Jiang Xi didn't deny it. "Yes, exactly."

"But there haven't been any special-phenotype Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feasts for a long time. The only lead we have is this guy named Mo Ran."

"Right."

"You need that guy to have kids."

"Precisely."

Xue Meng's lip curled in a sneer. "But he's gay."

"Super gay," clarified Jiang Xi.

Xue Meng gnashed his teeth. "So you guys spent over a decade developing a dating sim called *Destiny Pervertations*—"

"*Destiny Permutations*," corrected Jiang Xi. There was no expression on his face. "Strictly speaking, it's not a dating sim."

"Who cares if it's pervertations or permutations!" Xue Meng's voice rose. "You want me to use it to run simulations until I find a way to correct Mo Ran's sexual orientation, and go down different routes to match him up with some busty long-legged girls to have babies with—"

Mister Chief Jiang Xi waggled a finger at him. "They don't have to be busty or long-legged as long as they've got child-bearing hips."

A shriek of concentrated rage echoed down the hallway outside the chief's office. "That's just pimping with extra steps!"

"Calm down. *Destiny Permutations* runs simulations. It's for research purposes only." Jiang Xi took a sip of tea. "The bureau will collect data from your results and use it to create a finalized implementation plan."

"I refuse."

"Relax, kid." Chief Jiang said. "Just pretend you're a beta player for a dating sim."

"I said I refuse! Do you need to go get your hearing checked by a specialist, Captain Jiang?"

Unfortunately, the captain was not swayed. Xue Meng had no choice but to accept this mission. Chief Jiang wasn't completely heartless. He very kindly gave Xue Meng a companion: a talking paper dragon.

"Assistant, counselor, guide, toy, in-game companion, court jester, whatever you want to call it." Jiang Xi picked up a Ru ware teacup and said in languid tones, "It's yours now. It'll go into the simulation with you and help you come up with ideas." He waved a hand, ignoring the fit Xue Meng was throwing. "Get started, rookie."

"*What* did you just call me?"

But Chief Jiang paid him no mind. He gestured, and the new grad was ushered away by a few smiling young ladies, provided with the

necessary equipment, and set up to begin the game.

The world spun around him. Xue Meng found himself transported to the first scenario. He'd heard of youths being banned from video games, but never youths forced to play them—yet what was he supposed to do? Jiang Xi said this was his first mission. The faster he got it over with, the better.

Feeling claws digging into his shoulder, Xue Meng turned with a scowl to discover a little paper dragon crouched there. Its foreclaws were clutching a mission guide pamphlet. As it flipped through the pages, it exclaimed, "Ooooo, ooooooooooh, ooooh!"

"Shut up," snapped Xue Meng. "Are you a pigeon?"

"How dare you! I'm the all-powerful, all-knowing Dragon of the Candle!" The paper dragon smacked Xue Meng in the face with its tail. "That way."

Xue Meng looked in the direction it pointed—a dark and suspicious little alley, its dank walls plastered with peeling advertisements. The ground was wet with a mix of unidentifiable fluids that resembled trash bag leakage combined with the contents of spit cups.

Xue Meng spun on his heel and headed determinedly in the other direction.

"Eek, where are you going?"

"Somewhere more hygienic."

"You think I want to go over there?" The paper dragon flexed its little claws in anger and thwapped its mission pamphlet on Xue Meng's nose. "Use your eyes! It's telling you to walk six hundred feet into the alley and find a noodle shop—that's where you'll see primary-school-age Mo Ran!"

Xue Meng took the mission guide and skimmed it skeptically. The paper dragon was right. He handed it back with a scowl and strode into the darkness, holding his breath.

Maybe he was suffering a fit of insanity. He walked through the alley just as the report asked him. After taking a left turn partway down, the pathway widened and became cleaner.

"Yes! Right there! The noodle shop called Back Again?—do you see it?" The dragon turned a few excited loops; it was so embarrassing Xue

Meng couldn't help being glad no one in the simulation world could see them.

He soon found the student Mo Ran among the noodle shop's customers. He had to admit his target was, at the very least, readily identifiable. He wore a tattered backpack and shuffled around in sneakers with peeling soles; his greasy black hair flopped limply over his brow, looking like it'd gone several days without a wash. Though Xue Meng was still a distance away, he could tell Mo Ran stank—the other customers gave him a wide berth.

"A malnourished little mutt," commented Xue Meng, hand on his chin.

"He gets super hot once he grows up," the little dragon reminded him.

"So why are we looking for Mo Ran while he's in primary school? Can't we look for the hot older version and shove some aphrodisiacs down his throat? Then we just grab a girl and lock them up in a room together—wouldn't we be done?"

The dragon side-eyed him. "Kid, we're from the Bureau, not a brothel."

Xue Meng stared right back.

"Also, the CWPB prohibits unlawful drugging. You have to make Mo Ran *willingly* fall in love with a girl he'll marry and have kids with. Obviously, giving him a childhood sweetheart is the easiest route," said the dragon. It reread the mission overview in search of something to back it up its assertion. Unfortunately it was successful. "Ha! I *told* you I was the all-knowing, all-powerful Dragon of the Candle! Look, there's a list of recommended partners right here!"

"Are you sure Jiang Xi didn't give you a cheat code?" Xue Meng disdainfully snatched up the papers again. He smoothed out the wrinkles left by the little dragon's claws and peered at the text beneath the grimy streetlights.

Damn it all. It really did have ten possible female targets listed for Mo Ran.

"Candidate 1. Jane Doe. Meet-cute strategy: Cast a spell to make the noodle shop's dog Max suddenly go rabid and bite Mo Ran while he's eating noodles. A Volkswagen Santana will drive by right at the same time, and the car's driver will kindly offer to take Mo Ran to the hospital for the shot. Jane Doe is the driver's daughter, one year younger than Mo Ran—in third grade. They'll get to know each other in the car and become childhood sweethearts."

Xue Meng read the next name with a look that very clearly communicated *Are you fucking kidding me?*

"Candidate 2. Jane Roe. Meet-cute strategy: Cast a spell to make the noodle shop's dog Max have a heart attack—"

"Nope." Xue Meng, after spending far too much time rubber-stamping proposals for pig and chicken farms, had a lot of sympathy for animals. His conscience instantly vetoed the idea, but curiosity made him read on. "After Max dies, the noodle shop owner's daughter will come weep over its body. Her crying will draw the attention of her friend Jane Roe, and Mo Ran will meet both girls."

"Why can't we just work on the noodle shop owner's daughter?" mumbled Xue Meng.

The dragon smacked Xue Meng in the face with its tail, then jabbed it at the girl in question—she was three times Mo Ran's size, her eyes small and squinted. She was crouched in front of the storefront in garish red and green pajamas, picking at her feet and chewing on garlic.

"I see," said Xue Meng after a pause. If they chose the noodle shop owner's daughter, Mo Ran would probably tumble deeper into the abyss of homosexuality.

Well, even if he hated his job, he was duty bound to do his best. Comrade Xue considered himself a responsible Daoist and upstanding cultivator. Despite his grumbling, he carefully read through the dossier on the ten prospective female partners. Whoever wrote the thing had to have been a jobless incel—they had listed the heights, weights, and interests of each lady beside each two-inch profile picture.

Xue Meng, with the typical taste of a straight male, picked out a girl named Jane Toe.

“Um,” said the paper dragon. “That name doesn’t sound promising.”

“What do you know? She’s cute; I bet she’ll grow up to be a stunner.” Xue Meng said with confidence. “There’s no way Mo Ran will go gay if we choose this one.”

“Don’t say I didn’t warn you.”

Man and dragon skimmed down to the route walkthrough.

“To trigger Jane Toe’s route,” the candle dragon read aloud, “wait for Mo Ran to finish his noodles and walk two blocks away before summoning rain. Mo Ran will run beneath the nearest eaves using his backpack as an umbrella. He’ll hear the sound of a little girl crying from the next street over—”

“This sounds like a horror story.”

“Dumbass, it’s obviously a damsel in distress,” scoffed the dragon. “Look—it says Mo Ran’s going to go looking for the source of the crying. He’ll find our little Jane Toe being bullied by a group of girls who call themselves the Big Bosom Besties. Our little Mo Ran is going to charge in and fight for her in the name of justice. That’s how they’ll meet.”

There was no time to waste. The dragon summoned a heavy rainstorm while Xue Meng went off to make sure Little Miss Jane Toe was surrounded by the schoolyard gang. Everything went just as planned, until the girl who breasted the most boobily picked up a brick and slammed it down on Mo Ran’s head. The little knight in shining armor collapsed in the rain, face-first.

Xue Meng and the candle dragon both blinked.

“Isn’t he supposed to be a special-phenotype Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast?” blurted Xue Meng. “They demolished him! Are you kidding me?”

“Maybe he’s too young?” the dragon suggested.

Lightning crackled overhead as Mo Ran lay in the puddle with blood gushing from his head. The ringleader exclaimed, “Run, y’all, he’s dead!” She and her lackeys scattered like birds, sprinting into the rain.

But they were quickly outdone by Little Miss Jane Toe, who went white as a ghost when she saw Mo Ran sprawled out in the rain. With a shrill scream, she abandoned her savior and ran off. The speed of her

disappearance left Xue Meng flabbergasted—how had the Big Bosom gang caught her in the first place? A frightened rabbit couldn't even run that fast.

Xue Meng and the dragon crouched beside the unconscious Mo Ran and exchanged a look. "What do we do now? Wake him up?"

"We can't directly affect the people in the simulation…"

Xue Meng went pale. "So he's going to bleed out on the pavement?"

"Aiya, it's just a simulation after all, not a transmigration. It doesn't matter if he dies." said the dragon coarsely. "Press X to respawn. GG."

He wasn't wrong—but that didn't make Xue Meng any less enraged. He picked up the mission booklet, fury radiating from every eyelash and every blue blood vessel. "Is this book lying?! We followed the walkthrough perfectly, so how did we fail?"

The dragon hesitated, then stretched a claw out and tapped the last line on the back cover.

Disclaimer: The instructions provided in this book are from Big Fraud Fortunetelling and may not be 100% accurate. Use at your own risk.

After a moment of stunned silence, Xue Meng turned his face up to the sky and shrieked, "Jiang Xi, you *motherfucker*!"

Unfortunately, despite the advanced technology behind *Destiny Permutations,* it was not programmed for any kind of mother fucking, let alone by Jiang Xi.

Destiny Permutations was a detailed simulation of the real world. They had to collect more data on unique phenomena before they could continue. Thus, their first priority was to prevent Mo Ran from bleeding out from his little noggin.

The best thing to do would be to draw some Good Samaritan's attention to this shadowy alley, where a little boy was in need of 911's tender loving care. They knocked over garbage cans to block the way of passersby and cast spells so stray cats would bite the hems of their pants, but all they got was people cursing out the garbage cans and crazy cats. It was already late in the afternoon; everyone was rushing home. Nobody would look down an out-of-the-way alley like this one.

"Wanning, wait here."

A mother and son turned the corner. The woman was young and beautiful, wearing a camel cashmere coat. Her son, whose head came only up to her hip, was holding a white umbrella with a big cat printed on it. The rain had dyed his long, inky lashes even darker. The wind rose, and the child tucked his pale, delicate face deeper into his cashmere scarf until only his bright eyes were visible.

"Mommy's going across the street to deal with some work things. Stay here and don't move. I'll be back in a minute."

The boy nodded obediently. The beanie on his head slid down a little, covering one eye.

"Yesss! This little guy! Make another stray cat bite his pants!" cried the little dragon.

Xue Meng didn't need to be told twice. Things went much more smoothly this time; the little boy immediately noticed the dark alley and followed the cat over. He stared in shock at Mo Ran, prone on the ground. "Hey, are you okay?"

Watching invisibly over his shoulder, Xue Meng and the little dragon let out long sighs of relief.

"Hallelujah."

"Goodness still exists in the world."

They mopped at the sweat on their faces. Xue Meng watched the boy run across the street in search of his mother, then dug out that accursed guide once more. "Well now I'm dying to know how the Jane Toe route turns out."

As if in answer, the pages of the booklet flipped of their own accord and came to a stop on a later page. The booklet glowed gold. Their surroundings warped and changed; by the time they could see again, they'd traveled twenty years into the future.

"Waaaaugh! What are you doing?" wailed the candle dragon.

"I wasn't serious." Xue Meng was equally confused. "I didn't think the book would send us twenty years into the future to see the results!"

The candle dragon stared at him.

“But,” said Xue Meng slowly, “that means our actions *did* impact Mo Ran’s future. Otherwise, the guide wouldn’t have brought us here.”

The dragon huffed and puffed in impotent fury, then sighed. “You’re right. We should have set him on Jane Toe’s route. Let’s go see what happened.”

They walked until they found themselves on the same street, twenty years later. It looked much the same, save that the nearby buildings had grown shabbier. Every storefront had the words *For Demolition* scrawled over it in huge red letters. There was hardly another soul anywhere on the street. Things seemed rather bleak.

“The whole block’s getting bulldozed next month.” Xue Meng heard a low voice coming from a corner to his left. Even without seeing him, he could tell the speaker was smiling. “I’ll almost miss it.”

“I feel the same.” It was another male voice, cool and crisp. “After all, this was our old haunt.”

“Ha ha. More importantly, this is where we first met, isn’t it?”

The cooler voice laughed too. “You were lying in the mud when I met you. Aren’t you embarrassed to bring it up?”

The first man’s reply was too low to make out—and then all they could hear from the dark corner were the wet sounds of kissing and the rough breathing of two men.

Xue Meng and the little candle dragon stared in slack-jawed astonishment at the two tall and handsome men making out, their hands all over each other. Although twenty years had passed, they recognized the pair instantly.

“So…” the dragon began.

“Mo Ran still became…” Xue Meng continued with difficulty.

“Goddamn gay!” Man and dragon finished in unison. They turned to look at each other, almost on the verge of tears, and wailed, “And we’re the ones who did it!”

The dragon hissed. “It’s your fault! Who told you to make the stray cat lead this ‘Wanning’ kid over?”

Xue Meng hadn't expected the dragon to push the blame onto him. "*My* fault?!" he raged. "Who was it that made such a big storm Mo Ran couldn't see clearly while he was fighting? You're the reason he got a brick to the head!"

"It's your fault! You're the one who picked the Jane Toe route! Great decision *that* was!"

"No, it's your fault! You didn't show me the disclaimer on the back of the book until it was too late! Selfish, shitty little dragon!"

"Are you blind? It's *your* fault!"

"It's *your* fault! You're so annoying!"

"Your fault! Your fault! Your fault—!"

While the two employees of the CWPB were yelling at each other, Mo Ran and Chu Wanning stepped out of the shadows hand in hand. They strolled down the old street that would soon be demolished, reminiscing about the twenty years they'd spent together.

BALENCIAGA

Watching their retreating silhouettes, Xue Meng pinned the little dragon's head down and howled hysterically. *"It's! All! Your! Fault!"*

Regardless, the mission needed to go on. If one strategy failed, they'd have to try another. There were so many girls in the world. There was sure to be one they could introduce to Mo Ran so he would get married and have kids. *Fight on!* they told themselves. *There's no way a dating sim would only have one ending!*

Anger and ambition burning in their hearts, these two employees selected a new route in *Destiny Permutations*.

"We're not in that gross alley anymore," said Xue Meng as he regained his balance and looked around. "I think we've been sent to a school gymnasium."

The Only Possibility:
Chapter 3

SUNSET SMEARED caramel light on the glass of the gymnasium. Outside, the skies were the rich red of brocade. Xue Meng and the little dragon did a lap around the building. Hardly anyone was here at this time of day; practice was over, and the only lights left on were in the equipment room.

Man and dragon looked at each other and struck out in that direction.

Inside, they found an adolescent Mo Ran. He was in seventh grade but had yet to hit his growth spurt, likely because his family was too poor; food was scarce at home. He barely looked different from the child at the noodle shop. Mo Ran's scrawny limbs were drowning in a school uniform that swallowed him up like a burlap sack, and his dirty hair hung lank around his face—a ghostly little thing, easy to overlook.

The little ghost sat cross-legged on the ground with his back to them, tidying up the badminton birdies left by the other students.

"Why's he all alone?" asked Xue Meng. "Isn't anyone going to help him?"

The dragon flipped through the mission pamphlet, frowning. "Let's see—they had a badminton tournament with the neighboring class this afternoon and lost badly. His teammates all thought it was Mo Ran's fault, so they left him here to clean things up alone." It clicked its tongue. "Ah, poor kid."

Being made a scapegoat was a novel concept to Xue Meng, spoiled darling of the heavens. He blinked in confusion, and only after several long seconds did his eyes widen with comprehension.

"Fucking hell!" he raged. "What kind of bullshit is this? Picking on someone just because you lost a game? Did these people get their heads slammed in a door as kids?!"

"I commend your righteous spirit, dear Xue Meng. But our objective right now seems to be triggering the next meet-cute for the little underdog."

"I commend your ruthlessness, Four-Legged Worm." Xue Meng rolled his eyes, then scooted closer to study up on the new female love interest.

At this point in the game, there were three routes they could trigger.

"The first one is called Yao Lan. She's a senior two grades above Mo Ran."

"Then she's going to graduate soon." The candle dragon shook its head. "No way; there're too many things that could go wrong."

"You're right." Xue Meng narrowed his eyes and looked at the next entry. "The next is Rong Yan, she's… The fuck? The *principal*?"

The candle dragon gaped at him. "Mo Ran can romance the principal?"

"She's thirty-six! He's only thirteen! That's not a fucking age gap, that's an age Mariana Trench!"

They were still arguing when a big red X appeared on the guide, followed by a line of small text, wobbly with embarrassment. *I'm so sorry orz, I made a mistake. She's not romanceable.*

The candle dragon gawked.

"So the AI in this AI guide stands for Artificial Idiocy?" Xue Meng asked.

Abashed, the guide scrubbed out the lines about Rong Yan, moving so hastily it accidentally wiped out half Yao Lan's photo as well.

"One left." Xue Meng flipped the page. "This girl. Luo Xianxian."

According to the guide, Luo Xianxian was the prettiest girl in Mo Ran's class. Lots of the boys had crushes on her, but she never let it go to her head. She was gentle, well-behaved, and kind.

"Perfect, this is the one," said Xue Meng. "Sing her praises any more and I'll fall in love too—perfect wife material."

"That's just your opinion." The dragon was far more worldly than he. "Some men have more unique tastes—her heels have to be four-inch stilettos, no shorter, complete with red lipstick, a little leather crop, sunglasses, a uniform cap, and a skin-tight bodysuit. The type of woman

who doesn't just slap you once when she gets angry—she'll backhand both cheeks equally."

"I think you're talking about elite VIPs of a BD—*ahem*—SM club."

Whether Mo Ran had VIP tastes, they didn't know, but they were at least certain Luo Xianxian was a likelier target for success than Yao Lan.

Let the romancing commence!

"Figure out how to keep Mo Ran in the equipment room until six o'clock, when the self-study period starts," Xue Meng read aloud. "Make sure he looks super sad and pathetic."

"What else?"

Xue Meng reviewed the guide again. "That's it."

"That's it?" exclaimed the dragon.

"That's it," said Xue Meng as he closed the book.

The dragon craned its neck to peer at the clock on the wall. "It's almost five. We only have to keep him here for another hour."

The two of them rolled up their sleeves and got down to business. Stalling for time was too easy. They watched Mo Ran carefully, and just as he'd painstakingly put each racquet back on the rack, they cast a spell to make it sway. With an unnatural totter, it collapsed, scattering ping-pong balls and paddles across the floor.

Mo Ran stared in silence. As the teen's ink-dark eyes widened in puppyish hurt, Xue Meng and the little dragon both felt guilt prick their hearts. But surely they weren't doing anything wrong?

Mo Ran hastily began tidying up again. He was nimble, and clearing the floor took him hardly any time at all. Though he was left sweaty and panting by the time he finished, he seemed born to tidy. Xue Meng watched in shock as he put the last fallen paddle back in the bucket and shoved it in the corner. The entire process had taken barely fifteen minutes. Speechless, he swallowed and elbowed the little dragon. "Do it again."

Mo Ran watched the equipment rack have an aneurysm and collapse for a second time.

He was beyond words.

Then came the third and the fourth collapses…

They watched Mo Ran exhaust himself scampering all over the gymnasium after those balls. He was dripping sweat and his eyes were hopelessly confused, but he still cleaned up each time. He repeatedly checked the steadiness of the rack and carefully put the equipment back in its place—only for it all to go tumbling out again.

After the fourth time, Mo Ran stood dazedly in front of the equipment rack, tears welling in his eyes—he likely thought another student had set some high-tech prank on him. Clutching a basketball, his scrawny form looked all the more pitiable.

Xue Meng couldn't take it anymore—his conscience was killing him. "Are we the bad guys?"

The candle dragon put its pudgy paws over its small, beady eyes. "No," it wailed. "*You're* the bad guy, I'm just a bad dragon."

It was five minutes to six.

Panting, Mo Ran fixed the rack, at least four times taller than he was, and climbed down the ladder.

He stood in front of it, hesitating, for over ten seconds.

Nothing happened. It didn't fall over.

Finally, he let out a breath of relief. He shuffled wearily in the direction of the door, blissfully unaware of Xue Meng and the dragon squabbling right next to him.

"You do it!"

"No! I just did it!"

"I did it way more times than you!"

"I refuse! My conscience won't let me! It feels like I'm bullying a little kid!"

"You think I feel any better about it?!"

It was three minutes to six. Just as the handle turned in Mo Ran's hand—just as their mission was going to fail again—Xue Meng pulled through. He clenched his jaw and hardened his heart, thinking of those long

hours rubber-stamping proposals. Squeezing his eyes shut, he struck the equipment rack as hard as he could.

With a tremendous crash, the entire rack slammed into the ground. A huge cloud of dust ballooned up. The room was an even greater mess than when Mo Ran started.

They were all struck dumb—be it the invisible Xue Meng and candle dragon, or the young Mo Ran cowering by the doorway.

"But it's finally six, right?" The dragon patted Xue Meng, whose heart had shattered alongside the equipment rack. "Aiya, it's not like you wanted to do it. You know how they say heaven gives its hardest battles to its strongest—"

Xue Meng was still crouched next to Mo Ran, who was silently picking up yet again. He bit his lip. "Shut up."

The dragon fell silent. But no time at all passed before Xue Meng heard it shrilling again. "Hey! Hey, look—"

"Shut up!" yelled Xue Meng.

"Luo Xianxian's here!" cried the little dragon.

Xue Meng's head snapped up. In the dim yellow glow of the gymnasium lights, the supple lines of Luo Xianxian's figure appeared outside the cracked-open doors. She pushed them open, long, pale legs moving beneath her pleated uniform skirt. Her sneaker-clad feet seemed to skim over the vinyl flooring as elegantly as a mermaid from the depths of the sea.

The clouds parted, light burst forth, angelic choirs sang!

At least that was how Xue Meng felt. His eyes glimmered with tears. *Thank goodness!* He didn't have to go against his conscience and shove the rack over again! Just for that, he'd give Luo Xianxian full marks!

"Mo Ran?" Luo Xianxian's voice was sweet and soft, like orange blossoms in summer. Xue Meng and the candle dragon looked to each other with tears in their eyes, convinced Mo Ran's gayness would be cured.

Miss Luo, class sweetheart, swiftly followed the light to the equipment room and carefully stuck her head in. As soon as she caught

sight of Mo Ran still working, her beautiful eyes widened. “Huh…why’s it so messy in here?”

Mo Ran’s head whipped up. Upon recognizing her, he sighed. “The rack fell over.”

“The teacher told me to get you for evening self-study.” Luo Xianxian took another step into the room and looked around. “Why don’t I give you a hand? It’ll go quicker with two of us. We can go back together once it’s done.”

Mo Ran blinked. Sweat dripped from his eyelashes and into his eye, and he scrubbed at it hastily. “Thanks,” he mumbled.

“What a beautiful beginning,” said the candle dragon, deeply moved.

“Positively heartwarming,” Xue Meng pronounced.

The teenage boy and girl busily began to help each other in the dim little room. Luo Xianxian’s pleated skirt swished in time with her footsteps. Mo Ran grabbed wayward volleyballs and brought them to her. The pretty girl stood on the rack scaffolding and arranged the equipment.

The candle dragon sobbed, tears streaming over its scaly face. “Human love stories are sooo cute.”

For once, Xue Meng agreed—likely because this one was of his own making. “How sweet and simple. You can’t help but be moved.”

Those two classmates went up and down the ladder, but Xue Meng’s final destructive shove had been a bit too strong. It took much longer to tidy up the mess he’d made this time; even a full hour of two people firing on all cylinders wasn’t enough to finish the job. Soon it was time for the gymnasium to close.

When the footsteps of the student on patrol that week sounded outside the doors, Xue Meng and the candle dragon were still busy congratulating themselves. They turned to see a handsome older student walk in, clutching a clipboard next to the badge on his chest.

Both of them stared in blank shock. The smiles on their faces had stiffened like dog poop left in the sun.

“That’s…” Xue Meng’s mouth had gone dry.

But the candle dragon could still scream, and scream it did. “That’s Chu Wanning!”

Chu Wanning walked into the dim equipment room. He had surprising composure for a teen—the sight of that hurricane-swept room only made him frown. “What’s going on?”

Mo Ran turned, eyes sparkling with healthy exertion. Cleaning with Luo Xianxian had both cheered him up and calmed him down, and he thoughtlessly beamed at this unfamiliar student, his cheeks dimpling. “The rack collapsed, so we’ve been cleaning it up. Xuezhang,[3] you’ll need to wait a while longer before you can lock the doors.”

Chu Wanning sighed. As Xue Meng and the dragon shook their heads frantically, he put down his clipboard and stepped into the room that’d previously been inhabited by one girl and one boy. Despite his resting bitch face, the older boy had a kind heart. “I’ll help.”

Luo Xianxian smiled. “That’d be awesome. Thanks, Xuezhang.”

“Thank you, my ass!” wept Xue Meng and the dragon.

Xue Meng’s last blow to the equipment rack had been just a bit too strong. This was the butterfly effect at work—his small error had led to a completely different outcome.

To their great dismay, when *Destiny Permutations* brought them twenty years into the future, they found Mo Ran, who’d become a key stakeholder in the school, chatting in the gymnasium stands with the present principal. This must have been why the guide had miscalculated—it had confused Principal Rong with Principal Chu.

It was once again just past six, the sunset like a bright sea of glorious red maples on the horizon. Hardly anyone else was in the empty gymnasium. Mo Ran and Principal Chu sat in the stands, watching the students on cleaning duty mop the floor. The facilities had been renovated and enlarged some time ago, and the gymnasium was now several times bigger than it’d been when they were students. The students worked on one side of the gym while the two of them sat at the other, too far away for the students to see their faces.

The candle dragon clutched the last of its hopes in its sharp little claws and asked shakily, “Where’s Luo Xianxian?”

Xue Meng said nothing. He'd noticed Mr. Mo holding Principal Chu's hand in the shadows. When the students weren't looking, Mo Ran even pressed close and snuck a peck on Chu Wanning's cheek.

For fuck's sake.

…Another respawn! Don't fucking tell me it's impossible!

They gathered themselves and instructed *Destiny Permutations* to take them to another inflection point in the game.

"Where are we this time?" groused the little candle dragon, still reeling from the jump.

Xue Meng was just as irritated. He scanned their surroundings. "We're way earlier in the timeline; Mo Ran's probably in preschool right now. I doubt he even knows what gender is yet—maybe this is our chance to change the ending."

"So where is he?"

Xue Meng pointed to their right, reading out the words emblazoned on the door in round, inviting font. "Just Kidding Children's Playpark."

The dragon rubbed its paws together. It was glowing gold with passion again, its eyes bright with excitement. "Okay! Playgrounds are full of cute little girls. This time, we have to find Mo Ran a perfect match—we can't fail again!"

But Xue Meng, wiser after the last two failures, was more cautious this time. Instead of charging in, he narrowed his eyes in thought for a long time. At last he looked up. "I wonder if we should change our approach."

"Wha?" The candle dragon twitched its whiskers. "Whaddya mean?"

"The last two times, we failed when Chu Wanning showed up. I've got a bad feeling that even if we trigger the female love interest route this time, Chu Wanning's secondary route will still turn up. It's like he and Mo Ran are destined to be together—some sort of in-game bug."

The dragon flicked its tail in displeasure. "What they have going on isn't *destiny*—they're more like a buy one, get one free shampoo deal at the supermarket."

“Exactly,” said Xue Meng. “Think about it. If we follow what the guide says and do all that work to bring him a pretty girl, then for some thrice-damned reason Chu Wanning happens to walk by…”

The dragon looked up with its beady eyes. It only had to think for a moment before a reedy scream issued from its throat. “It’d be fucking game over!”

Xue Meng smacked his thigh. “Exactly! It *would* be fucking game over!”

“So what should we do?!”

Xue Meng, the overachiever who’d bravely abandoned the walkthrough in favor of developing a wholly original playstyle, puffed out his chest with confidence. “This time, we need to do more than trigger the love interest route—we have to stop the NPC Chu Wanning from ever showing up!”

Gratifyingly, the little dragon burst into applause. But after a moment, it realized it was still rather confused. It tried to scratch its head, only to find its paws were too stubby to reach.

Xue Meng glanced at it. Feeling suddenly magnanimous, he reached over to help his little companion scratch its paper scales.

The little candle dragon purred like a tractor engine under his ministrations. “Your plan’s pretty good, but I have one question. We didn’t program this game. How do we know when Chu Wanning will show up?”

“I’ve already thought of that.” Xue Meng grinned. “This time, hold your horses. Don’t do *anything*. Let Mo Ran make his own decisions and see how he meets Chu Wanning. Of course, it’s best if he doesn’t. If there’s any scenario where they’re likely to meet, we have to be careful when we do the actual romancing to avoid anything like it.”

Perhaps the little dragon was merely pleased with Xue Meng’s massage services, or maybe it actually thought he had a good idea—or both. It smacked its lips and said with real admiration, “You’re right. Seriously, you’re *quite* the impressive young man.”

Thus the two compatriots were agreed—this time, they wouldn’t do anything. They would simply go inside the playground and see how Chu

Wanning would meet Mo Ran.

The Only Possibility:
Chapter 4

"ICE CREAM, ice cream for sale! Chocolate ice cream, banana ice cream, all kinds of sorbet—come try a scoop!"

A girl wearing a pair of bunny ears waved a wooden sign, cheerfully trying to catch the attention of passersby—by the looks of her, a student working a summer job. Her face was young and lively, cheeks ruddy in the sun. Her lips were as glossy as a syrup-coated cherry on a cheesecake. Even the two pimples on her forehead couldn't diminish her cuteness.

She was surrounded by a gaggle of kids in yellow sun bonnets, chirping at her like a flock of sparrows.

"Ma'am! Strawberry, please!"

"Me first! I want three!"

"Xiao-jiejie, can I touch your bunny ears?"

Miss Bunny Ears flashed her smile at all of them, but Xue Meng noticed she gave everyone who called her *Xiao-jiejie* a generous scoop and handed them their ice cream first, whereas everyone who called her *Ma'am* was made to wait till the very end, only to receive a noticeably smaller portion.

Xue Meng and the candle dragon watched from nearby. The dragon licked its lips. "I want ice cream too. Two scoops—one matcha, one chocolate."

"Get real. I'm not buying you any," Xue Meng said impatiently. "Plus, remember, we're in the game. She can't see us, and we can't eat ice cream. Got it?"

The little dragon rolled its eyes, sorely affronted. "I was just *saying*."

Xue Meng ignored it, scrutinizing the crowd. "Looks like a spring trip organized by the preschool. Look for Mo Ran."

They spotted him soon enough. Mo Ran's family was poor, and he was a scruffy-looking kid, so he didn't have many friends. As expected, he didn't crowd around the cart like the rest of his classmates. He could buy a whole week's worth of breakfast for the price of that ice cream. No way would he waste the money on something that would melt away in minutes.

Mo Ran sat alone in the shade of a tree, staring at his classmates. He wanted to taste the ice cream so badly he unconsciously licked his lips, then bit down on his bottom lip to hide the movement. Actually, he looked just like the candle dragon. Xue Meng stifled a snort of laughter.

Embarrassed, the dragon snapped, "What are you laughing at? How dare!"

Mo Ran had no ice cream, no friends, and only a pathetic assortment of snacks in his bag. He sat dolefully beneath the tree. Come noon, he gnawed on a stale piece of bread and scattered the crumbs by the tree's roots. He stared raptly at the ants marching in lines to share the tiny morsels with their comrades.

"Don't push, there's plenty for everyone," he murmured, hugging his knees as he watched his ant friends. He was so bored he started giving them names.

"Brad Pitt, that piece is too heavy, I don't think you'll be able to lift it. Wanna find a smaller one?"

"Jimmy Fallon, wait your turn—Leonardo DiCaprio saw that crumb first. Don't bully your juniors… Oh wait, actually, you guys are the same age, aren't you?"

He was in his own little world, oblivious to the bustle around him. Xue Meng and the dragon sat on either side of him, two translucent forms. But it seemed like none of the three figures under the tree were actually there. Everyone at school—his classmates, his teachers—seemed to look straight through him.

Mo Ran didn't get upset or cry over this. After all, he was having a great time with his ant buddies. About the time Mo Ran was in preschool, a craze for the space opera *Star Warts* was sweeping the country. Apparently, the little boy had gotten caught up in it too. "Princess Leia, you don't have to fight over that. Here, I have more bread."

"Uh, R2-D2, don't get lost. The ant hill's this way…"

His intense focus on his play began to draw the attention of other children. The chubbiest kid in the class lurched over to him, round cheeks trembling. As soon as he heard Mo Ran talking to "R2-D2," the kid's eyes widened. "Whatcha doing? Who're you talking to?"

Mo Ran threw up a hand to block his way. "Watch out, you're about to step on the Millennium Falcon."

The other kid gaped at him.

Pointing at the ants, Mo Ran introduced them with a grin. "See, that one's Brad Pitt, that's Jimmy Fallon, and Leonardo DiCaprio, and Justin Timberlake, and this one with the big nose is Han Solo…"

The chubby kid looked concerned. "Do you have a fever? Ants don't have noses."

"I'm good, I feel fine," Mo Ran answered patiently. "Ants *do* have noses, you just have to look really carefully. And—do you see that one, with the bit of red? That's Britney Spears."

"Then…who are you?" the kid asked, a note of fear creeping into his voice.

Mo Ran pondered for a moment, then said decisively, "I'm Darth Vader."

Xue Meng and the little dragon were losing it. Xue Meng threw an invisible arm over the boy's shoulder, tears of mirth streaming down his face. "Oh my god, you're actually the best, kiddo—after we're done with this job, I'm gonna find Mo Ran in real life and become his friend for real."

The candle dragon, too, was wheezing with laughter. "Then you'll end up as a super powerful Sith Lord too!"

Unfortunately, the other kid didn't find Mo Ran interesting at all. Rather, he thought he might be touched in the head. He threw him one last wary glance, then jogged away with his shoulders hunched like a squat, lumbering tank. He was moving so fast he stumbled over a pebble; after hoisting up his pants, he continued shuffling away from Mo Ran as quick as he could.

A few minutes later, Mo Ran was suddenly inspired to build a park for the ants.

Xue Meng sat next to him and watched as he fashioned a bridge from a twig and a sunshade from a leaf. He piled pebbles into a tiny fence. Still, he was unsatisfied. He carved a hollow into the dirt, one not too deep, then dusted his hands and set out toward a little creek in the woods next to the playground.

"What's he doing?" the little dragon asked, perplexed. It peered down at Mo Ran's ant park.

Xue Meng looked at the hole. "I think he wants to make a lake for the ants."

"Doesn't he know the water will just seep into the dirt?"

This time, Xue Meng was the one to roll his eyes. "Seriously? He's in *preschool*. He's not even six."

As they grumbled back and forth, Xue Meng glimpsed another child walking by on the gravel trail. He blinked, then jabbed the little dragon with his elbow, looking stricken. "Quick! What time is it? To the second!"

The jab sent the little dragon flying in a somersault. "The hell are you doing?!" it snarled. "Use your words! Can I at least get a *please*?"

"*Now*!" Xue Meng looked like he'd seen a ghost. "Check the time! This is the boss fight!"

"Huh? What bo—" The candle dragon choked as it followed Xue Meng's line of sight. "Ahh! *Fuck*!"

Both of them began frantically patting themselves down for a watch or anything they could use to tell the time.

The dragon wailed piteously, "What are the chances of Chu Wanning being *here*?"

"Didn't you say they're like a buy one, get one shampoo deal? Why are you acting so surprised?!" Unable to find a watch or a phone, Xue Meng was growing increasingly frantic.

"I take it back!" the dragon howled. "They're not a two-pack of shampoo—at least you can cut those apart after you get home! These two

are like the Oreo filling and cookie!"

Regardless of what exactly the right analogy was, as the young Chu Wanning walked past the tree, he couldn't help taking notice of the curious arrangement of twigs, pebbles, and leaves, as well as the incomplete little hollow in the ground. He paused, then slowly approached the deserted tree (Xue Meng and the candle dragon didn't count). The canopy cast a soft shadow over his fair skin. He gazed down silently at the ant park, then looked around.

No one was nearby. Had the project been abandoned?

Chu Wanning pondered for a moment. Then—in his crisp white button-up shirt, pale-blue overalls, and his Italian leather shoes—he crouched down in the dirt. Unaware of Xue Meng and the little dragon's inaudible protests, he began fiddling with the half-built park Mo Ran had left behind.

"We're screwed," said Xue Meng.

"We're so fucking screwed," said the dragon.

"The Chu Wanning route *still* got triggered," the two said in unison.

When Mo Ran reappeared with a plastic bottle full of water from the creek, he was taken aback to find an unexpected visitor next to his precious park.

"Stop!"

The young Chu Wanning jumped in surprise. Eyes widening like a startled kitten, he stared at the kid rushing toward him.

"I wasn't…" Chu Wanning was still holding a twig in one hand. Embarrassed, he looked down at the park, then looked back up. "I was just…"

The grimy little kid nervously shielded his ant park behind him. "I swear I have a building permit."

Chu Wanning blinked.

"You can't tear it down," little Mo Ran insisted.

"I wasn't planning to."

Mo Ran gave him a quizzical look.

“I think it’s really cool. Can I play with you?” Chu Wanning asked, shy.

And that was that. Chu Wanning suggested they replace the walls Mo Ran had piled up with pebbles with ones made of twigs. Both agreed this was an excellent idea. Chu Wanning found some suitable twigs in a pile of leaves. Mo Ran drove them into the soft, spongy dirt at even intervals. Together, they replaced the wall. After lining the hollow in the dirt with a plastic bag, they poured in the creek water to finish the man-made lake.

Chu Wanning had picked up a handful of haitang petals from who knew where, which he scattered over the lake’s surface. He even placed a few little ants onto the petals so that they could enjoy a perfumed boat ride.

Mo Ran was a bit too enthusiastic excavating the lake and splashed mud onto Chu Wanning’s expensive clothes. But Chu Wanning didn’t care at all. It turned out he had quite a lot in common with this scrawny, grimy kid whom he’d just met.

The two played joyfully, with no thought given to the stains on their clothes, the mud on their hands, or the sweat on their faces. All that mattered were those two pairs of eyes shining bright as stars, and the park for ants rising up under their hands like a dream come true.

At last the sun began to set. It was time for the preschoolers to go home. Chu Wanning, on the other hand, had come to the park with his father. He could stay as long as he liked.

“Finish the tower for me, okay?” Mo Ran said as the rest of the class streamed toward the bus. He stood reluctantly.

Chu Wanning’s little face was usually hard to read, but this made him smile. “Okay. When I’m done, I’ll get my daddy to take a picture of it.”

“Remember to show me next time.”

“Mn, I will.”

Mo Ran blinked, then gasped as it hit him. “Ah! W-we played together so long, but I didn’t even ask you your name!”

Chu Wanning froze, then grinned, his face lighting up. “Yeah… I forgot too.”

Mo Ran started to laugh. “It feels like we’ve known each other forever.”

Chu Wanning pressed his lips together without saying anything, but his eyes curved in a smile.

“I’m Mo Ran. I’m in Pre-K at Drunken Fish Elementary.” Mo Ran hesitated, then stuck out one mud-encrusted hand, like a businessman making a deal on TV. He quickly checked himself, pulling back his hand and wiping it on his shirt, then presented it to Chu Wanning again. “Nice to meet you,” he said, grinning.

Without a moment’s hesitation, Chu Wanning took the kid’s grimy little paw. His soft black hair fluttered in the breeze. “Nice to meet you too. I’m Chu Wanning.”

“You know, suddenly, I think they’re pretty good together,” the little dragon mumbled.

“You don’t say,” Xue Meng replied, feeling a headache coming on. “It’s making me a little emotional, actually…”

“No—you can’t get emotional; you’re being brainwashed!” the dragon cried. “We have to do our part for the greater good of genetic engineering!”

“That’s right!” Xue Meng looked like he’d been slapped awake. “We know where and when Chu Wanning will show up now,” he said, a fresh determination in his voice. “Start this part over again from the beginning—this time, we’ll be prepared! We’ll definitely prevent the Chu Wanning route from triggering!”

The Only Possibility:
Chapter 5

THIS TIME, Xue Meng's plan would succeed. There was no such thing as an unbreakable ship—only players who didn't try hard enough to break them. In this game Xue Meng had mentally redubbed *Mo Ran Totally Isn't Gay*, Xue Meng had put on a masterclass demonstration of his talent and wit. For once, he would keep these two damned male lovebirds away from each other.

He and the candle dragon flipped through the booklet. They picked out a female lead and hashed out a plan. The man and the dragon each patrolled their own territory: Xue Meng kept a close watch over Mo Ran on the north side of the playground, while the paper dragon stood guard over Chu Wanning in the south. At last, when the spring outing had ended, Mo Ran got back on the school bus having seen neither hide nor hair of Chu Wanning. It felt like cause for celebration.

"We did it!"

"And we sparked a friendship between Mo Ran and that girl!"

"They'll be besties in no time!"

"Once they become teenagers, they'll sneak around behind their parents' backs!"

"They'll make out in their uniforms behind the gym after school!"

"They'll hide boxes of gross, super sweet chocolate in each other's backpacks!"

"There'll be a sudden thunderstorm after evening study hall, and he'll carry her on his back so she won't get her pink ballet flats wet!"

Xue Meng threw his head back and laughed uproariously. "Pink ballet flats is a bit much." He paused, eyes sparkling. "But carrying his girlfriend home in a thunderstorm is an excellent idea. How tall will Mo Ran be in high school?"

The dragon riffled through the booklet. “Between six-one and six-three, it depends—somewhere in that range.”

“Tsk, he’s really…” A strange expression flitted over Xue Meng’s face—a flash of envy, quickly suppressed. The effect was vaguely pained, as if he was suffering from a toothache. He pouted instead of finishing his sentence and hoped the little dragon hadn’t noticed that he was wearing padded insoles in his shoes. “At any rate, their love story will be smooth sailing from here on out,” Xue Meng said firmly. “It *has* to be. Otherwise, I have no idea what I’ll say to Jiang Xi.”

In the interest of ensuring the budding relationship between Mo Ran and the girl would take secure root, free from disruptions, Xue Meng and the dragon observed them for some time. Conveniently, the passage of time could be adjusted at will in the simulation. They just had to tell the mission guide when they wanted to go.

“We want to see Mo Ran’s first date with this girl,” said the candle dragon.

“A proper, one-on-one date,” Xue Meng added, “no third wheels. I mean, I don’t know if you can call anything a ‘date’ at their age, but you’re clever, aren’t you? You know what we mean.” He’d already forgotten that he’d called this guide Artificial Idiocy. He prompted: “Like playing together, doing homework, hanging out and doing stuff together, playing house, whatever. Anything along those lines.”

Eager to redeem itself, the guide swiftly brought them ten days into the future.

It was dark out. They stood outside an apartment building in a large housing complex. Behind the creamy yellow squares of its windows, they could hear housewives doing dishes, children raising their voices, and the faint drone of the anchor of the evening news. It must have been about seven o’clock at night.

Mo Ran appeared in the distance. He looked just as they’d hoped: He had a small backpack slung over his shoulders and carried a lunch box emblazoned with a bootleg Winnie the Pooh. The cartoon’s nose had flaked off, making the already unfortunate knock-off bear look comically sinister.

But the bad vibes from the bear were wholly offset by the little girl chattering away at Mo Ran's side.

"I live on the second floor. My dad's on a business trip, but my mom's home. Don't be scared; she's really nice." The girl's eyes curved into crescents, her long lashes fluttering in the orange light of the streetlamps. "I told her you were coming over to play yesterday. She said she's gonna make her salted egg yolk wings, plus she's getting the cotton cheesecake from the shop next door—you have to wait in line for it. Do you like cotton cheesecake?"

"I-I…" Mo Ran stammered. Xue Meng noticed the soles were peeling on his shabby sneakers. "I've never had it."

But the girl didn't mock him. After a beat of surprise, she laughed gaily. "You'll definitely like it! If you don't, I'll eat yours—just don't tell my mom. I eat so much she's always worried I'll get fat."

Mo Ran ducked his head, kicking the grit by the side of the road with his disintegrating shoes. This was asking for trouble—now those tattered sneakers looked even more unpresentable. "You won't get fat," he mumbled.

"What did you say?"

"You won't get fat," Mo Ran repeated. Even in the dim light, Xue Meng spotted a faint blush on his cheeks. "I'll give you all my cake if you want it." He bit his lip and turned awkwardly aside. This time, even the slow-on-the-uptake candle dragon noticed the redness of his ears. "I won't tell your mom."

The paper dragon cavorted around them in excited circles. "Ahh!" it crowed. "I'm in *love* with this girl!"

"I love her too," Xue Meng agreed, grinning. "Didn't I say it? There are so many sweet girls in this world. How could there possibly be a gay man who can't be swayed? Look—if it keeps going this well, we'll wrap this assignment up in no time."

"I wanna see their wedding already—no, I'm ready to meet their kid!" The little dragon's eyes shone as it loop-de-looped through the air. "So what if I'm a single dragon?" It wiped a fake tear from its eye with a

little dragon claw. “As long as my ship sails, I’d happily be single for a hundred years!”

They followed Mo Ran and the girl upstairs, then observed as the two children ate dinner, split a piece of cheesecake, watched TV, and did their homework together.

Ah, puppy love! Truly, the best time to find a girlfriend was in primary school. Otherwise you might find that, by the time you graduated from college, you didn’t have a single female friend in your contacts. Maybe that was the point where the gay bar started to look like a good option.

At eight-thirty, Xue Meng and the dragon followed Mo Ran out of the apartment as he said goodbye to the girl and her mother. With a spring in his step, Mo Ran left to catch the last bus. The two interlopers followed with dopey grins on their faces.

They continued to watch. Mo Ran came to visit a few more times, but he seemed to be worried he’d give her parents the wrong impression if he came too often. When he wanted to play, he snuck around the back of the building and tossed pebbles against the girl’s bedroom window.

“Looks like his angsty teen years have arrived ahead of schedule,” Xue Meng remarked. His arms were crossed over his chest, but his eyes were sparkling.

“I think we’ve got this in the bag,” the paper dragon said.

The little dragon had jinxed it—no sooner had the words left its mouth than Mo Ran’s aim slipped, and the pebble hit the neighbor’s window instead.

The two CWPB representatives, oblivious to the wheels of fate churning before their eyes, were still congratulating themselves.

“What a devoted little kid this Mo Ran is.”

“And so romantic too!”

“After they start dating, this’ll be such a cute memory.”

Their enthusiastic chatter almost drowned out the sound of the neighbor’s window opening. A young voice called out, sleepy and clearly annoyed: “Pulling pranks at this hour—don’t you think it’s a bit much?”

Xue Meng and the dragon felt like buckets of ice had been dumped on their heads.

Maybe it's Maybelli—wait, no. Maybe it's him. Again.

Man and dragon wore identical looks of horror. They swallowed, then turned fearfully—

"Ah!"

"Aaaaahhhh!"

Each wail was more terrible than the last, like death knells ringing in the day of reckoning. They turned to one another and cried in unison, "What the fuck?! Chu Wanning lives next door to that girl?!"

They couldn't accept it—how could they possibly accept it?! How could they let fate reach out and slap them across the face like this?! How could they let the pride of their country turn into a fruity-ass queer—that was the wrong kind of pride!

"At least they met under unhappy circumstances this time," said Xue Meng, trying to find the silver lining—though he looked deflated.

"That's right," said the dragon, trying to convince itself as much as Xue Meng. "After such a bad first impression, there's no way they become friends."

"There's still hope for this route; we should keep trying."

"I think so too. At the very least, we should see what happens a year from now."

In agreement, they told the guide to zip them a year in the future.

They found themselves in the same housing complex, on a night much like the previous one. Mo Ran was standing in the same spot under the flickering orange streetlight, plunged into darkness every so often when the voltage dropped. He was even using the same little pebbles to hit a window gleaming in the moonlight.

But the window he was hurling pebbles at belonged not to the girl, but rather to the girl's neighbor, Chu Wanning.

"Tell me this is a coincidence," the little dragon said weakly. "Tell me he just has awful aim and missed the window he was trying to hit."

Xue Meng was a rational young man. He watched in silence, ashen-faced.

One errant pebble could be chalked up to chance, but ten pebbles could only mean true love. No one could possibly hit the wrong window ten times in a row. The person he wanted to see was the boy who lived next to the girl—Chu Wanning.

What the actual *fucking* hell!

The window opened, and the fragrance of magnolia spilled into the room on the summer breeze. Behind the fluttering gauze curtain, Chu Wanning was wearing a set of fleece pajamas. Though his expression was sleepy and impatient, he had brought a little stool over to the window. He clambered atop it, then stood on his tiptoes and peered down.

"What are you doing here again?" Chu Wanning yawned, elbows propped on the windowsill. His voice was soft as he asked Mo Ran languidly, "Weren't we just playing basketball this afternoon?"

Mo Ran grinned up at him from beneath the street lamps. He'd brought several paper airplanes. One by one, he tossed them up toward Chu Wanning.

Finally, one of them caught a lucky breeze and landed in the room. Chu Wanning unfolded the little paper plane. A drawing of a white cat next to a little dog revealed itself, along with some words scrawled in yellow crayon:

I forgot to tell you goodnight. Hope you have sweet dreams. Tomorrow we will play in the swiming (I don't know how to spell this word) pool. Let's ask our friend Ling-er to come if she is intrested (I haven't learned this word yet).

Mo Ran

"So." The paper dragon twitched with each word. "He and Chu Wanning are *we*, and the adorable little girl next door is *our friend*."

Xue Meng didn't answer for a good while. He scoured every obscure corner of his mind for some refined or subtle phrase to appropriately describe the misery he felt right now. Perhaps some Tang or Song dynasty poetry, or Yuan dynasty plays, even a Western opera would do—the kind of

pithy line that made him break out in goosebumps. But he couldn't think of a single thing. At last, rage burning a hole through him, he gritted out, "Goddamn homosexual—fuck you and your fucking grandpa."

"Watch your language there."

"My language's none of your business! I'm so mad I could die!"

"That's not what I meant," said the paper dragon. "I'm just saying, if you fucked his grandpa, you'd be a homosexual too."

Xue Meng glared at the dragon in speechless fury.

"*And* it would be such a problematic age gap. Like an age Mariana Trench."

The Only Possibility:
Chapter 6

AFTER TRYING ROUTE upon route upon route, Xue Meng and the little candle dragon came to a realization: Perhaps the problem wasn't that Mo Ran was gay, but rather that on every branching path of his life, he would always meet and fall in love with Chu Wanning.

The two stood in Chief Jiang's office, giving their mission report.

"Instead of wracking our brains trying to introduce the right girl to Mo Ran, we'd be better off killing Chu Wanning," the candle dragon concluded.

"Or changing Chu Wanning's sex," added Xue Meng.

"Or Mo Ran's."

"Regardless, there's nothing to be done. No matter how we play the game or how many romanceable female characters are available, Mo Ran always ends up with Chu Wanning."

Chief Jiang Xi glowered as he listened to these two underlings' excuses. Cheek propped in one hand, he flipped through the thick report. These pages detailed the outcomes of Mo Ran's routes with each of the different female leads. The conclusion was the same for each: He and Chu Wanning always ended up together.

"I thought this was a dating sim with lots of different routes," said Xue Meng, his expression every bit as dour as Jiang Xi's. "Who'd've thought it's the most boring kind, with only one possible ending? Chief Jiang, have you ever played *The Legend of Sword and Fairy*? Even in 1998…or was it 2001…I can't remember. Anyway, even that ancient RPG had a hidden storyline where the doomed protagonist Lin Yueru survived."

He bit his bottom lip, downcast. "Mo Ran's entire *life* is worse than *Sword and Fairy 1* from 1998. He doesn't even *have* a hidden storyline."

Jiang Xi's young underling rambled on and on, standing in front of his desk with his arms crossed. Chief Jiang didn't say a word in reply. As he

skimmed that report of failure after failure, his scowl deepened.

"We don't have to limit ourselves to this lifetime," Jiang Xi said at last, glancing up. "Have you looked into Mo Ran's other incarnations?"

"'Course we have," Xue Meng answered. "We looked at the Republican era, future timelines… We tried everything we could. Look—just keep reading."

The second half of the report was devoted to possible female pairings from many of Mo Ran's other incarnations.

"The Republican-era timeline was the most depressing," the dragon said, piping up. "In that one, Mo Ran was the son of a rich landowner. When he was little, his father betrothed him to the daughter of another family in town. As soon as the girl was old enough, Mo Ran was supposed to marry her and bring her into the family."

"Oh?" said Jiang Xi. "And that didn't work?"

The dragon was caught between laughter and tears. "Sure didn't! Before the girl came of age, Mo Ran left home and joined the Nationalists. He announced he wanted the freedom to choose his own future, so he rejected the marriage arrangement."

"And then what?"

"Then fighting broke out, first with the Japanese, then the civil war. The Nationalists sent him to infiltrate the Communists as a spy." Xue Meng heaved a sigh. He reached over the desk and flipped the pages to the section about the Republican-era timeline. "This photo here. The rascal looks all neatly turned out, doesn't he—you can't tell he's a wolf in sheep's clothing. So everything was going fine in the beginning."

Jiang Xi could already see where this was going. He asked drily, "How did Chu Wanning show up this time?"

"I'm getting there," said Xue Meng, waving a hand. "He was the commander of the unit Mo Ran infiltrated. During an ambush, Mo Ran took a bullet and passed out from blood loss. It was Commander Chu who carried that Nationalist spy off the battlefield and into the safety of the trenches."

Jiang Xi blinked.

“Chu Wanning nearly died saving him,” the candle dragon added helpfully.

Jiang Xi sighed. “So after Mo Ran woke up, he betrayed the Nationalists and gave up being a spy. He became fully committed to Chu Wanning’s side.”

He didn’t even phrase it as a question. Through the gun smoke and the gore, he could almost see Mo Ran’s transformation in that other timeline.

“Yeah,” said Xue Meng, rolling his eyes. “And then they fell in love. They turned down all the lady comrades people tried to introduce to them. They’d fought side by side; they’d lain in the same trench, hugging their rifles, staring up at the stars. They exchanged bullets as tokens and wore them as matching necklaces tucked beneath their clothes. After the Communists won, they moved into the same compound—those two confirmed bachelors made thousands of girls lose their minds. They folded dumplings together, rode their Phoenix bikes together, went to the photo studio together to take colored photographs, went to the supermarket together to get paper bags full of maltose candies.”

Xue Meng ran through these sepia-toned stories in a rapid-fire barrage. Although the anecdotes flew by faster than shooting stars, Jiang Xi could easily imagine each and every one of these scenes. The pale smoke, the tattered uniforms. Deep in the trench forged from clay and blood, two young men kept watch, their backs braced against one another’s. Their long lashes glimmered with the light of the stars above. In the distance, one of their fellow soldiers played the harmonica, the plaintive melody floating into the wispy clouds. There was no battle tonight. The only sign of unrest was the faint, persistent haze and the dusky stubble that dotted these two young men’s chins.

“Eventually, they got old,” Xue Meng said flatly. Now that the sentimental part of the story was over, he slowed down. “Even the Cultural Revolution couldn’t pry those two geezers apart.”

The cloying sweetness of love lingered even beyond death.

Jiang Xi was silent for a long while. Then he closed the report and massaged his temples, as though he had a headache.

Some said couples were like birds in a forest—when calamity struck, each flew their own way. But if the two old coots could stay together even through that decade of strife, Jiang Xi really didn't know if it was possible to turn Mo Ran straight merely by shoving a nice girl into his arms.

Maybe it wasn't necessarily that Mo Ran was destined to be gay—maybe he was simply fated to have Chu Wanning in his life.

The end of the work day had arrived. As "Going Home" played in the background (Jiang Xi's predecessor Chief Nangong's favorite song), the CWPB's workers trickled from the building.

Some lived in the cultivation world and could ride their swords home without a second thought. Others lived among commoners. Since most ordinary citizens of the world no longer believed that gods, demons, and immortals coexisted alongside them, these cultivators concealed their abilities. Some rode the bus or the subway, while others drove, each disappearing into the brightly lit night.

"I don't think there's any point in continuing," Jiang Xi said, his back to Xue Meng and the candle dragon. He looked out of the floor-to-ceiling window at the traffic streaming by below. "Let's leave it be."

It took Xue Meng a moment to understand. "Huh?"

Arms crossed, Jiang Xi glanced back at him. "What I mean is, your assignment's over."

No matter what they tried, the game ended the same way. Unless the cultivation world came up with a totally new research strategy, there was no need to keep running more experiments.

"Go home," said Jiang Xi.

It was the first time Xue Meng had failed an assignment. Really, it was none of his business—but there was something that still weighed on his mind. He scraped the tip of his shoe against the carpet, then said cautiously, "I have a question."

Jiang Xi turned to face him. Leaning back against the spotless window, he raised his lashes and looked appraisingly at Xue Meng. "Go on."

Xue Meng took a deep breath. “When the simulation showed me his childhood, I realized he was probably around my age.”

“So?”

“So why don’t we just find him and ask him if he’ll cooperate with our research?”

Jiang Xi was quiet for a beat, then snorted. “Genetic research is risky. The modern world isn’t like the one you learned about in your history classes. These days, the cultivation world doesn’t do things in such a crude and ignorant way. We’d never subject a free individual to something like that.”

Xue Meng was silent.

“It doesn’t matter if he’s a Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast or not,” Jiang Xi continued. “Wake up, kid. That dog-eat-dog world is a thing of the past.”

In the cool light of the chief’s office, Xue Meng’s face turned faintly pink. “That’s not what I meant,” he mumbled. “I just… I just didn’t know…”

Jiang Xi swept his papers into an even pile, then looked up at Xue Meng. “I know that’s not what you meant,” he said. “But I’ll remind you now—it doesn’t matter who your dad is, kid. It doesn’t matter how good your grades were, how many scholarships you won, how many shiny trophies are displayed on your mommy’s bookshelf.”

Xue Meng’s face went redder and redder. Before, he was embarrassed; now he was angry.

“I don’t care how good a little worker bee you were under Chief Nangong. How many papers you stamped, how many projects you reviewed.”

Jiang Xi ignored Xue Meng’s growing fury. He locked the files in his drawer, then straightened his dark-green silk tie with slender fingers. “Under my leadership, you still have plenty to learn.”

With that, Xue Meng’s overbearing manager strode past him and out the door.

Xue Meng was shaking with anger. At last, he couldn't hold himself back. *"Jiang Xi!"*

Jiang Xi only paused for a second at the threshold. He glanced back at his underling, mouth pressed into a thin line. "Turn off the lights when you leave."

Xue Meng was so mad he couldn't speak.

It was seven o'clock when the last light went dark in the CWPB's office building. Of late there had been no unrest to combat or any major projects with looming deadlines; no one was working overtime. Everyone had somewhere to be, whether it was meeting with friends or going on a date with their partners. Married couples curled up on their sofas, watching the flashing blue light of their TVs with a bowl of popcorn. Tall young lads put on their aprons and helped their parents put dinner on the table. They all had their own lives.

Jiang Xi might've been an agent of chaos, but he spoke the truth. There was no such thing as a perfect world without injustice or flaw, but the world they lived in today was undeniably better than that of the past. They were many generations removed from those tumultuous days of old—so much so that many of the figures and events of those eras had been submerged in the river of time, and countless souls had been reborn many cycles over.

You might not be the person you once were, just as I might not be the person I once was either. But even so, we can be together.

The young would grow old, just as what was fresh would rot, and the living would be felled to time. But the souls that intertwined with one another so closely would always be gifted new forms of flesh and blood. Those attachments, undiluted through each cycle of reincarnation, would make themselves known. Lovers would find themselves in each other's arms, in the past and in the future, entangled in each and every lifetime.

Xue Meng said his goodbyes to the candle dragon and walked out into the night. Snowflakes drifted down from the dark sky and scattered in the golden lights of the bustling city. He had no umbrella, so he turned up

his collar and sped toward the nearest bus stop. His breath misted out in clouds of white.

Alongside him, in this city veiled by night and beyond, countless fates interwove and overlapped—

The old man running Li-shifu's Pan-Fried Buns was closing out the register. He was a good man and honest with his customers, and business was booming. He counted his bills with a smile, making plans to buy the *Ancient Sword Forms* box set from the bookstore on his day off. He loved inscrutable old books like that; even if they were mystifying, he adored reading them.

The daughter of the Luo family was turning twenty-six in a few hours. She'd just gotten her master's in agriculture and forestry, and she was now in a taxi heading to a club downtown for her birthday. She didn't know she was about to reunite with her childhood sweetheart, the older boy who'd lived next door then moved away, at the party her best friend was throwing her. Soon she would receive the love that was fated to be hers.

Mrs. Sun beamed and clicked her bright nails against the table as she watched patrons betting big in the glittering casino she owned. How nice it was to be rich.

Miss Ye and her fiancé sat in a bridal shop, having already spent half an hour arguing seriously over the placement of one particular pearl on the gown. It was like that pearl was the most important thing in the world, and all their worries would disappear the moment the position of this little bead was finalized. What a sickening pair of lovebirds—their only disagreement was about the placement of a pearl on her wedding dress.

And what of another couple, three streets over? Mo Ran and Chu Wanning, living their lives peacefully in this world. They weren't simulations or a game. They weren't Xue Meng's mission. But unsurprisingly, they were together yet again.

The happy couple was currently fighting over something completely insignificant.

"Can't you pick a manlier movie, the kind that gets your blood pumping?"

The fight had started because Mo Ran wanted to see a romance starring the famous actress Xun Fengruo, while Chu Wanning preferred the action movie with kung-fu lead Zhen Congming.

Chu Wanning was glaring at his boyfriend, eyes narrowed dangerously. Though Mo Ran was half a head taller than him, Chu Wanning's aura was imposing. If not for the softness of his lashes, fluttering like flower pistils beneath the streetlights, he would've looked even more intimidating.

"Every time we go to the movies, it's either a comedy or a love story—listen to yourself." Chu Wanning ground his teeth. "*The Husky and His White Cat Shizun*? Do you have slop for brains? That has to be a cartoon, right? Won't the posters say 'a family-friendly romp'?"

Mo Ran gave his furious boyfriend his most pitiful puppy dog eyes. He tried to speak up for the equally pitiful film *The Husky and His White Cat Shizun*, but Chu Wanning cut him off.

"I can't handle your taste in movies anymore."

Mo Ran swallowed back his words.

"I told you I was done last time after *Teletubbies vs. Voldemort* and *Captain America vs. The Powerpuff Girls*. You're never, ever, *ever*, going to convince me to watch trashy movies like that with you again!"

It seemed Chu Wanning had been holding this in for quite some time; a wave of furious scolding burst from his mouth, his rage making his objections sound totally nonsensical. "I'm a *cop*, Mo Ran. I'm still a cop once I clock out and take off the uniform; I can't keep losing brain cells all the time when I'm with you… Why are you looking at me like that?"

Mo Ran still said nothing.

"You think I'll give in if you look at me like that? *Please*, you're a grown man—you're not embarrassed to go up to the box office and ask the lady for two tickets to *The Husky and His White Cat Shizun*?"

Mo Ran kept looking at him with those woebegone eyes. Uncharacteristically, he contradicted him: "My coworker told me it's not a cartoon. I don't know if it's good, but I swear, it really is a serious drama…"

Chu Wanning finally lost it. “No serious movie would have such a dumbass title!”

With that parting shot, he sped ahead like a shooting star. Upon realizing Mo Ran hadn’t followed him, that he was standing there watching him walk off, he grew even angrier. “None!” he threw over his shoulder.

Mo Ran bit his lip and looked back at him in silence.

If Chief Jiang Xi of the CWPB had been there to witness their fight to this point, he surely would have sighed and said—*Look how boring modern society is. There’s no hope for these dumbfucks so down bad for one another. Why do they have to watch the same movie? Can’t they buy separate tickets and each watch the film they want, then regroup? What’s wrong with that? Are they two little girls who have to go to the bathroom holding hands between classes?*

Jiang Xi *would* think that way. After all, he was the high and mighty big-brained Captain Jiang.

At that moment, Chu Wanning was stewing in silence, hands shoved in the pockets of his black wool coat as he strode down the street. He shook off every attempt his boyfriend made to take his hand.

“Wanning…”

Silence.

“C’mon, don’t walk so fast, let’s talk things out…” Mo Ran lowered his voice, mumbling under his breath. “I swear it won’t be worse than *Teletubbies vs. Voldemort*. That one wasn’t even that bad. I actually want to see the sequel *Sailor Hagrid* when it comes out next year…”

Unfortunately, Chu Wanning heard him. He whirled, eyes huge with horror. “*What* did you say? Say that again… Never mind.” He shook his head as if to banish the nightmarish image conjured by the movie title and swallowed. “Don’t. I’ll pretend I heard nothing.”

“Okay.” Mo Ran said dolefully.

Chu Wanning marched onward, coat flapping in the wind. He really didn’t know what to say. Every time he thought he’d understood the depths of Mo Ran’s terrible taste, Mo Ran would find an even trashier movie to push the limits of his imagination.

Mo Ran followed him, just a step behind.

They continued like this for several blocks before Mo Ran mustered the courage to speak again. “How about…we decide with a round of rock-paper-scissors? Or draw straws… Or roll some dice…”

His voice petered out. He pulled to a halt, having noticed something out of the corner of his eye. A lightbulb went off.

“Hey, Chu Wanning!”

Chu Wanning’s tall and handsome boyfriend stopped on the side of the road. In the hazy yellow glow of the streetlights, he pointed to the right, where a baked sweet potato stall stood. The shopkeeper was yelling, “Sweet potatoes for sale, sweet potatoes!”

He tried again. “Hey. Chu Wanning.”

Chu Wanning ignored him.

“Officer Chu.” He bit his lip, hiding a smile. He knew Chu Wanning —what he liked to eat, how he liked to be addressed. They’d known each other too long for him not to.

As expected, Chu Wanning turned his head, though not the rest of him. His hands stayed in his coat pockets. He raised his chin and narrowed those lash-fringed eyes at the man under the streetlight.

Mo Ran met his gaze. He’d expected this, but still, it was hard not to laugh. He wasn’t quite sure what to do next; he considered what to say. The fruit of all his effort was one simple sentence: “Want some?”

Chu Wanning stared at him.

He took off his hat and scratched his head. “Baked sweet potatoes in the winter,” he said with a smile. “Aren’t they your favorite?”

Chu Wanning didn’t move.

“Look, they have the kind that’s white on the inside. You like those best, and they’re hard to find. Have one, won’t you? Don’t be mad anymore.”

Finally, Chu Wanning’s expression softened. He didn’t look like a chunk of ice frozen overnight in the north anymore. He stood for a while, then turned with his cheeks still slightly puffed in indignance. After stalking

back toward Mo Ran, he said, his voice toneless as if he wasn't tempted at all: "No. I'll have four."

"Whatever you want." His handsome boyfriend looked at him in fond exasperation. Seriously, this man used to act like a wild and untamable panther. Mo Ran's doting had softened him over the years. Now, he sometimes brought to mind a hissy little white cat—honestly he did. Mo Ran grinned. "Yep, have four. But won't you be too full for dinner?"

"Don't underestimate me. This is just an appetizer."

"Perfect, eat your appetizer, then we'll go have dinner and watch Zhen Congming's movie."

Chu Wanning accepted the piping hot sweet potato and took a bite. He shook his head, reining in the smile that threatened to betray him. "Or we can watch *The Husky and His White Cat Shizun*."

Mo Ran's eyes lit up. "Really?!"

"Mn. I'll lose brain cells with you again."

Mo Ran brightened in an instant; joy and fondness bubbled up like fizzy tablets dropped in water, transforming everything into sugary sweetness. "You're the best!" He paused. "Then, about *Sailor Hagrid*…"

"Don't even think about it."

Snow slowly blanketed the street. The lovers walked into the distance, leaving dark footprints, so very close together.

Xue Meng's bus stopped at a crosswalk; he stared at the thronging crowd and colorful streetlights without seeing them, focused on his music. He pressed his forehead to the chilly window, neon lights glittering in his dark eyes. Yawning, he failed to notice the pair crossing the street with baked sweet potatoes in their hands, arguing about *Sailor Hagrid*.

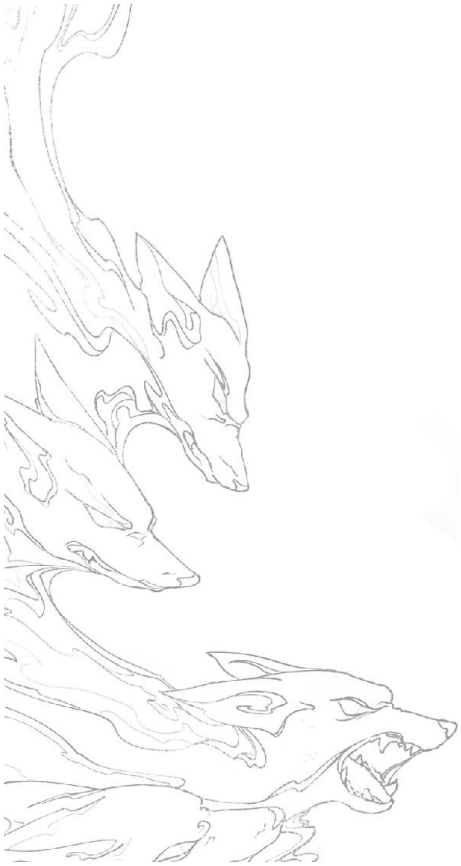
The traffic light turned green. The bus rumbled under him.

They'd passed each other by. Xue Meng hummed along to the song in his earbuds; he was off pitch, but why should that stop him? He was in a great mood. His phone had just buzzed with a text from his mom—his dad was home from his work trip, and she was making his favorite Sichuan boiled fish and chicken in spicy red oil for dinner. He'd hum if he liked. Even if the world was ending, he'd finish his fish first.

And wasn't it just like that? Life held infinite possibilities—a person might have a different career, birthplace, upbringing, and feelings; for a multitude of reasons, their appearance might have a million minor differences. But reincarnation couldn't change Xue Meng's love for Sichuan boiled fish, Chu Wanning's sweet tooth, or Mo Ran's infatuation with chili-oil wontons. Those things would never change. Their stories would lead to the same ending.

That was the compromise fate granted these insignificant beings who dared reach for the skies. After all their hardship and suffering had passed, they would—someday—have a happily ever after with the one they loved.

Those who loved deeply would always meet again.



THE STORY CONCLUDES IN
The Husky & His White Cat Shizun
VOLUME 11

APPENDIX

Characters, Names, and Locations

Characters

The identity of certain characters may be a spoiler; use this guide with caution on your first read of the novel.

Note on the given name translations: Chinese characters may have many different readings. Each reading here is just one out of several possible interpretations.

MAIN CHARACTERS

Mo Ran

墨燃 Surname Mo, "ink"; given name Ran, "to ignite"

COURTESY NAME: Weiyu (微雨 / "gentle rain")

TITLE(S):

Taxian-jun (踏仙君 / "treading on immortals")

WEAPON(S):

Bugui (不归 / "no return")

Jiangui (见鬼 / literally, "seeing ghosts"; metaphorically, "What the hell?")

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Fire

Orphaned at a young age by the death of his mother, Mo Ran was raised in the House of Drunken Jade by the abusive Madam Mo and her son. Later he burned the establishment down, but he was found by Xue Zhengyong and brought back to Sisheng Peak under the mistaken assumption that he was Xue Zhengyong's nephew. Despite his late start, he had a natural talent for cultivation.

In his previous lifetime, Chu Wanning's refusal to save Shi Mei as he died sent Mo Ran into a spiral of grief, hatred, and destruction. He reinvented himself as Taxian-jun, tyrannical emperor of the cultivation world, and committed many atrocities—including taking his own shizun

captive—before ultimately killing himself. Little did he expect to wake up in his fifteen-year-old body with all the memories of his past self and the opportunity to relive his life with all-new choices.

Since his rebirth, Mo Ran has realized many things are not as they had seemed in the previous lifetime, a realization that came to a head after Chu Wanning's death while sealing the Heavenly Rift at Butterfly Town. During the five years of Chu Wanning's seclusion following his return from the underworld, Mo Ran wandered the land making a name for himself as Mo-zongshi.

Chu Wanning

楚晚宁 Surname Chu; given name Wanning, "evening peace"

TITLE(S):

Yuheng of the Night Sky (晚夜玉衡 / Wanye, "late night"; Yuheng, "Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major")

Beidou Immortal (北斗仙尊 / Beidou "the Big Dipper," title *xianzun*, "immortal") also known as: Xia Sini (夏司逆 / homonym for "scare you to death")

WEAPON(S):

Tianwen / 天问 "Heavenly Inquiry: to ask the heavens about life's enigmatic questions." The name reflects Tianwen's interrogation ability.

Jiuge / 九歌 "Nine Songs." Chu Wanning describes it as having a "chilling temperament."

Huaisha / 怀沙 "Embracing Sand to Drown Oneself." Chu Wanning uses it rarely because of its "vicious nature."

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood and Metal

A powerful cultivator and elder of Sisheng Peak who specializes in barriers and is talented in mechanical engineering. Aloof, strict, and short-tempered, Chu Wanning has three Sisheng Peak disciples to his name—Xue Meng, Shi Mei, and Mo Ran—and has claimed Nangong Si as a disciple as well. In Mo Ran's previous lifetime, Chu Wanning stood up to Taxian-jun,

obstructing his tyrannical ambitions, before he was taken captive, eventually dying as his prisoner. In the present day, he is Mo Ran's shizun and lover. After Master Huaizui's death, he learns he was created from a piece of the Flame Emperor's sacred tree.

Chu Wanning's titles refer to the brightest stars in the Ursa Major constellation, reflecting his stellar skills and presence. Specifically, Yuheng is Alioth, the brightest star in Ursa Major, and the Big Dipper is an asterism consisting of the seven brightest stars of the same constellation. Furthermore, Chu Wanning's weapons are named after poems in the *Verses of Chu*, a collection by Qu Yuan from the Warring States Period. The weapons' primary attacks, such as "Wind," take their names from *Shijing: Classic of Poetry*, the oldest existing collection of Chinese poetry. The collection comprises 305 works that are categorized into popular songs and ballads (风 / feng, "wind"), courtly songs (雅 / ya, "elegant"), or eulogies (颂 / song, "ode").

SISHENG PEAK

Xue Meng

薛蒙 Surname Xue; given name Meng, "blind/ignorant"

COURTESY NAME: Ziming (子明 / "bright/clever son")

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire

The "darling of the heavens," Chu Wanning's first disciple, Xue Zhengyong and Madam Wang's son, and Mo Ran's cousin. Proud, haughty, and fiercely competitive, Xue Meng can at times be impulsive and rash. He often clashes with Mo Ran, especially when it comes to their shizun, whom he hugely admires. His weapon is the scimitar Longcheng.

Shi Mei (Hua Binan)

师昧 Surname Shi; given name Mei, "to conceal" / 华碧楠 Surname Hua; given name Binan, "jade, cedar"

COURTESY NAME: Mingjing (明净 / “bright and clean”)

TITLE(S): Hanlin the Sage (寒鳞圣手 / “cold, scales”; “highly skilled, sage doctor”)

EARLY NAME(S): Xue Ya (薛丫 / Surname Xue, given name Ya, “little girl”)

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Water

Xue Meng’s close friend, Chu Wanning’s second disciple, and Mo Ran’s boyhood crush, Shi Mei’s gentle and kind exterior is a facade for his cold and cunning interior. In the past timeline, he faked his death at the Heavenly Rift and used it along with the Flower of Eightfold Sorrows to manipulate Mo Ran into becoming Emperor Taxian-jun. After Chu Wanning’s death, he traveled into the present timeline using the same Space-Time Gate of Life and Death that Chu Wanning created. In the current timeline, he goes by his real name, Hua Binan, and presents himself as a medicinal zongshi of Guyueye, while his younger self remains a disciple of Sisheng Peak to maintain their control over Mo Ran. Both the older and younger versions of Shi Mei secretly work together in the present timeline towards their shared goal.

Xue Zhengyong

薛正雍 Surname Xue; given name Zhengyong, “righteous and harmonious”

WEAPON: Fan that reads “Xue is Beautiful” on one side and “Others are Ugly” on the opposite.

The sect leader of Sisheng Peak, Xue Meng’s father, and Mo Ran’s uncle. Jovial, boisterous, and made out of 100 percent wifeguy material, Xue Zhengyong takes his duty to protect the common people of the lower cultivation realm very much to heart.

Madam Wang (王夫人) Wang Chuqing (王初晴)

Surname Wang; given name Chuqing, “first light”

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Earth

Xue Meng's mother, lady of Sisheng Peak, and Mo Ran's aunt. Timid and unassuming, she originally hails from Guyueye Sect, having once been Jiang Xi's shijie, and specializes in the healing arts.

Xuanji Elder

璇玑长老 Xuanji, "Megrez, the delta Ursae Majoris star"

Kind and gentle; practices an easy cultivation method. Popular with the disciples.

Tanlang Elder

贪狼长老 Tanlang, "Dubhe, the Flirting Star in Sha Po Lang"

Sardonic and ungentle with his words. Good at the healing arts, and on pretty bad terms with Chu Wanning.

RUFENG SECT

Ye Wangxi

叶忘昔 Surname Ye; given name Wangxi, "to forget the past"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Earth

A disciple of Rufeng Sect, the adopted child of Rufeng Sect's chief elder. Highly regarded by the sect leader of Rufeng Sect, and a competent, chivalric, and upright individual. Noted by Mo Ran to have been second only to Chu Wanning in the entire cultivation world, in the previous lifetime.

Nangong Si

南宫驷 Surname Nangong; given name Si, "to ride" or "horse"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire

Heir to the now-fallen Rufeng Sect. Died in the previous lifetime before Mo Ran's ascension as Taxian-jun. Died in this lifetime on Mount Jiao in an attempt to save his fellow cultivators. Has a complicated relationship with Ye Wangxi, his devoted childhood companion, and was engaged to Song Qiutong before the untimely fall of Rufeng Sect.

Nangong Liu

南宫柳 Surname Nangong; given name Liu, "willow"

Leader of Rufeng Sect prior to its downfall and father to Nangong Si. Has a gift for flattery, but has since regressed to a childlike mental state after Rufeng Sect's downfall.

Naobaijin

瑙白金 Nao, "carnelian"; bai, "white"; jin, "gold"

Nangong Si's faewolf. Thrice the height of a human, with carnelian-red eyes, snow-white fur, and gold claws.

Song Qiutong

宋秋桐 Surname Song; given name Qiutong, "autumn, tung tree"

A Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast who bore a resemblance to Shi Mei. After being rescued by Ye Wangxi, she joined Rufeng Sect as a disciple and was betrothed to Nangong Si. After the fall of Rufeng Sect, she was kidnapped to Mount Huang and killed by Xu Shuanglin. In the previous lifetime, Taxian-jun took her as his wife and empress after burning Rufeng Sect. She also shares a name with a character in *Dream of the Red Chamber*.

Xu Shuanglin (Nangong Xu)

徐霜林 (南宫絮) Surname Xu; given name Shuanglin, "frost, forest" (Surname Nangong; given name Xu, "willow fluff")

The embittered brother of Nangong Liu and former disciple of Luo Fenghua. After faking his death, he adopted the false identity of Xu Shuanglin, under which he took in Ye Wangxi as his adoptive daughter and posed as one of Rufeng Sect's elders.

GUYUEYE SECT

Jiang Xi

姜曦 Surname Jiang; given name Xi, "dawn, sunshine"

Courtesy name: Yechen (夜沉 / "deep night")

The aloof, haughty sect leader of Guyueye Sect. Rumored to be the richest person in the cultivation world. Despite his age, he looks to be in his twenties due to his cultivation method. His weapon is the longsword Xuehuang.

OTHER CHARACTERS

Mei Hanxue (Younger)

梅含雪 Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, "to hold, snow"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Wood, Water

A striking cultivator with pale-gold hair and jade-green eyes, Mei Hanxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including dance and playing musical instruments, and is an appreciator of wine and song. His weapon is the longsword Shuofeng.

Mei Hänxue (Older)

梅寒雪 Surname Mei; given name Hanxue, "icy, snow"

SPIRITUAL ELEMENT(S): Fire, Water

A striking cultivator with pale-gold hair and jade-green eyes, Mei Hänxue is the head disciple of Kunlun Taxue Palace who stayed with the Xue family at Sisheng Peak for a short time as a child. He is skilled in various arts, including fending off lady cultivators, and is an appreciator of peace and quiet. His weapon is the longsword Shuofeng.

Translators' note: In the original Chinese, the names of the Mei twins are pronounced identically when spoken aloud while remaining distinguishable in the written text, as they use different characters for "Han." We have opted to mark the elder twin's name with a diaeresis —"Hänxue"—to maintain the distinction between their written names for readers of the English text.

Master Xuanjing (玄镜大师)

Abbot of Wubei Temple.

Master Huaizui

怀罪 Huai, "to bear, to think of"; zui, "sins, guilt, blame"

A monk of Wubei Temple. Originally Xiaoman, a young man of Lin'an who betrayed his fellow humans and caused the death of Chu Lan hundreds of years before the start of *Husky*'s events. He has lived his life attempting to atone ever since, up to and including creating Chu Wanning from a piece of the Flame Emperor's sacred tree to raise him as a body to house Chu Lan's souls. When Chu Wanning dies during a Heavenly Rift, Master Huaizui wields Rebirth, one of the three forbidden techniques, to bring him back from the underworld.

Ma Yun (马芸)

Sect leader of Taobao Estate. Rumored to be the third-richest person in the cultivation world.

Liu-gong (刘公)

An elderly servant of Taxian-jun in his previous lifetime.

Mu Yanli

木烟离 Surname Mu; given name Yanli, “smoke, to leave behind”

The reclusive pavilion master of Tianyin Pavilion, as cold, competent, and commanding as she is beautiful.

Zhen Congming

甄淙明 Surname Zhen; given name Congming, “water gurgling, bright/clever”

The thirteenth direct disciple of Li Wuxin. Ignorant, and ignorant of his own ignorance. His name is a homonym for the phrase “very smart.”

Huang Xiaoyue

黄啸月 Surname Huang; given name Xiaoyue, “whistle, moon”

Previous sect leader of Jiangdong Hall who died on Mount Jiao.

Song Qiao (Jade-Hearted Lord)

宋乔 **(化碧之尊)** Surname Song; given name Qiao, “tall” (hua bi zhi zun, “loyal ruler whose blood has turned to green jade”)

COURTESY NAME: Xingyi (星移, “shifting stars”)

The last zongshi from the Butterfly-Boned Beauty Feast tribe, who subdued a phoenix descended from the Vermilion Bird hundreds of years ago.

Ming Yuelou

明月楼 Surname Ming; given name Yuelou, “moon, building”

The leader of Taxue Palace, and an old friend of Xue Zhengyong's.

Gouchen the Exalted

勾陈上宫 Gouchen, "Curved Array, part of the Ursa Minor constellation"; shanggong, "exalted"

The God of Weaponry, who oversees the northern- and southernmost ends of the heavens, and whose domain includes all the weapons of the world. He forged the first true "sword" into existence at Dawning Peak for the Heavenly Emperor Fuxi during his war against demons. Named after one of the Four Heavenly Ministers in Chinese mythology who oversees matters in the human world.

Third Lady Sun

孙三娘 Surname Sun; title Sanniang, "Third lady"

The richest merchant on Flying Flower Isle, a lady in her fifties who seems to value money and little else at first glance, but who has proven herself to be a leader who puts her people first.

Demon Lord (魔尊)

The leader of all the demonic clans.

Pavilion Master Mu (木阁主)

Mu Yanli's father, and the previous sect leader of Tianyin Pavilion.

Lady Lin (林氏)

Mu Yanli's birth mother, and the first wife of Pavilion Master Mu.

Hua Gui

华归 Surname Hua; given name Gui, “return”

Shi Mei’s mother, a descendant of the Jade-Hearted Lord Song Xingyi.

Sects and Locations

THE TEN GREAT SECTS

The cultivation world is divided into the upper and lower cultivation realms. Most of the ten great sects are located within the upper cultivation realm, while Sisheng Peak is the only great sect within the lower cultivation realm.

Sisheng Peak

死生之巅 Sisheng zhi dian, "the peak of life and death"

A sect in the lower cultivation realm located in modern-day Sichuan. It sits near the boundary between the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and was founded relatively recently by Xue Zhengyong and his brother. The uniform of Sisheng Peak is light armor in dark blue with silver trim, and members of the sect practice cultivation methods that do not require abstinence from meat or other foods. The sect's name refers to both its physical location in the mountains as well as the metaphorical extremes of life and death. Xue Zhengyong named many locations in Sisheng Peak after places and entities in the underworld because the sect is located in an area thick with ghostly yin energy, and he is furthermore not the sort to think up conventionally nice-sounding, formal names.

Heaven-Piercing Tower (通天塔)

The location where Mo Ran first met Chu Wanning as well as the location where, in his past life, he laid himself to rest. It's where Sisheng Peak imprisons the spirits and demons they exorcise.

Loyalty Hall (丹心殿)

The main hall of Sisheng Peak. Taxian-jun renamed it Wushan Palace (巫山殿) when he took over the sect.

Red Lotus Pavilion (红莲水榭)

Chu Wanning's residence. An idyllic pavilion surrounded by rare red lotuses. Some have been known to call it "Red Lotus Hell" or the "Pavilion of Broken Legs." In the previous lifetime, Chu Wanning's body was kept at the Red Lotus Pavilion after his death, preserved by Taxian-jun's spiritual energy.

Linyi Rufeng Sect

临沂儒风门 Rufeng, "honoring Confucian ideals"

A prosperous sect in the upper cultivation realm located in Linyi, a prefecture in modern-day Shandong Province. Its seventy-two cities were burned to the ground by Taxian-jun in his lifetime and by Xu Shuanglin in the present timeline.

Mount Jiao (蛟山)

One of the four great evil mountains of the cultivation realm, a relic of its bloody past. It also serves as the burial grounds for Rufeng disciples, earning it the moniker of Rufeng Sect's heroes' tomb.

Kunlun Taxue Palace

昆仑踏雪宫 Taxue, "stepping softly across snow"

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on the Kunlun Mountain range. Its name refers to both the physical location of the sect in the snowy Kunlun Mountain range and the ethereal grace of the cultivators within the sect.

Heavenly Lake (天池)

A lake in Kunlun Taxue Palace's mountainous territory.

Guyueye

孤月夜 Guyueye, “a lonely moon in the night sky”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located on Rainbell Isle. They focus on the medicinal arts. The name is a reference to the solitary and isolated nature of Guyueye—the island is a lone figure in the water, much like the reflection of the moon, cold and aloof.

Rainbell Isle (霖铃屿)

Not an actual island, but the back of an enormous ancient tortoise, which was bound to the founder of the sect by a blood pact to carry the entirety of Guyueye sect on its shell.

Wubei Temple

无悲寺 wubei, “without sadness/grief”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Disciples of Wubei Temple are monks.

Bitan Manor

碧潭庄 bitan, “green pool”

A recently established and up-and-coming sect in the upper cultivation realm. Barriers are *not* their specialty.

Taobao Estate

桃宝山庄 Taobao, “Peach Treasure”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm located in West Lake.

Jiangdong Hall

江东堂 Jiangdong, the south bank of the Yangtze River

A sect in the upper cultivation realm. Qi Liangji became their new sect leader after the death of her husband, the previous sect leader.

Huohuang Pavilion

火凰阁 Huohuang, “fire, phoenix”

A sect in the upper cultivation realm.

Shangqing Pavilion

上清阁 Shangqing, “towards heaven”

One of the ten great sects, located in the upper cultivation realm. Shangqing Pavilion and Wubei Temple are the only two sects of the ten great sects to explicitly forbid sexual relationships and dual cultivation.

Tianyin Pavilion

天音阁 tianyin, “heavenly/divine sound”

An independent organization set up by the ten great sects that oversees trials and the imprisonment of criminals. They manage a prison that is reserved for criminals who have committed heinous crimes.

OTHER

Nanping Mountain (南屏山)

A secluded mountain far from the rest of the cultivation world.

Name Guide

Courtesy Names

Courtesy names were a tradition reserved for the upper class and were typically granted at the age of twenty. While it was generally a male-exclusive tradition, there is historical precedent for women adopting courtesy names after marriage. It was furthermore considered disrespectful for peers of the same generation to address one another by their birth name, especially in formal or written communication. Instead, one's birth name was used by elders, close friends, and spouses.

This tradition is no longer practiced in modern China, but is commonly seen in wuxia and xianxia media. As such, many characters in these novels have more than one name in these stories, though the tradition is often treated malleably for the sake of storytelling. For example, in *Husky*, characters receive their courtesy names at the age of fifteen rather than twenty.

Diminutives, nicknames, and name tags

A-: Friendly diminutive. Always a prefix. Usually for monosyllabic names, or one syllable out of a two-syllable name.

Da-: A prefix meaning "eldest."

Doubling: Doubling a syllable of a person's name can be a nickname, i.e. "Mengmeng"; it has childish or cutesy connotations.

-er: A word for "son" or "child." Added to a name, it expresses affection. Similar to calling someone "Little" or "Sonny." Always a suffix.

Xiao-: A diminutive meaning "little." Always a prefix.

Family

All of these terms can be used alone or with the person's name.

Di/Didi: Younger brother or a younger male friend.

Ge/Gege: Older brother or an older male friend.

Jie/Jiejie/Zizi: Older sister or an older female friend; "zizi" is a regional variant of "jieije."

Mei/Meimei: Younger sister or a younger female friend.

Cultivation

-jun: A term of respect, often used as a suffix after a title.

Daozhang/Xianjun/Xianzun/Xianzhang: Polite terms of address for cultivators, equivalent to "Mr. Cultivator." Can be used alone as a title or attached to someone's family name. Xianjun has an implication of immortality.

Qianbei: A respectful title or suffix for someone older, more experienced, and/or more skilled in a particular discipline. Not to be used for blood relatives.

Shishu: Martial uncle. For the shidi of one's master.

shizhu: "Benefactor, alms-giver." A respectful term used by Buddhist and Taoist monks and priests to address laypeople.

Zongshi: A title or suffix for a person of particularly outstanding skill; largely only applied to cultivators in the story of *Husky*.

Cultivation Sects

Shizun: Teacher/master. For one's master in one's own sect. Gender-neutral. Literal meaning is "honored/venerable master" and is a more respectful address, though Shifu is not disrespectful.

Shizu: Grand-teacher/master. For the master of one's master.

Shixiong/Shige: Older martial brother. For senior male members of one's own sect. Shige is a more familiar variant.

Shijie: Older martial sister. For senior female members of one's own sect.

Shidi: Younger martial brother. For junior male members of one's own sect.

Shimei: Younger martial sister. For junior female members of one's own sect.

Shigong: Husband of shizun/shifu.

Shiniang: Wife of shizun/shifu.

Zhangmen/Zhuangzhu/ Zunzhu: "Sect leader/Manor leader/Esteemed leader." Used to refer to the leader of the sect. Can be used on its own or appended to a family name, e.g., Xue-zunzhu.

Other

Gong/gonggong: A title or suffix. Can be used to refer to an elderly man, a man of high status, a grandfather, a father-in-law, or in a palace context, a eunuch.

Gongzi: Young master of an affluent household, or a polite way to address young men.

-xiansheng: A polite suffix for a man, similar to "Mister." Often used for teachers.

Yifu: Person formally acknowledged as one's father; sometimes a "godfather."

Pronunciation Guide

Mandarin Chinese is the official state language of mainland China, and pinyin is the official system of romanization in which it is written. As Mandarin is a tonal language, pinyin uses diacritical marks (e.g., ā, á, ă, à) to indicate these tonal inflections. Most words use one of four tones, though some (as in "de" in the title below) are a neutral tone. Furthermore, regional variance can change the way native Chinese speakers pronounce the same word. For those reasons and more, please consider the guide below a simplified introduction to pronunciation of select character names and sounds from the world of *Husky*.

More resources are available at sevenseasdanmei.com

NAMES

Èrhā hé tā de bái māo shī zūn

Èr as in **uh**

Hā as in **ha**rdy

Hé as in **hu**rt

Tā as in **ta**rdy

De as in **di**rt

Bái as in **bye**

Māo as in **mou**th

Shī as in **shh**

Z as in **z**oom, ūn as in harp**oon**

Mò Rán

Mò as in **mo**ron

Rán as in **run**ning

Chǔ Wǎnníng

Chǔ as in **choo**se

Wǎn as in **wan**ting

Níng as in run**ning**

Xuē Méng

X as in the **s** in **s**ilk, uē as in **weh**

M as in the **m** in **m**other, é as in **uh**, **ng** as in so**ng**

Shī Mèi

Shī as in **shh**

Mèi as in **may**

GENERAL CONSONANTS

Some Mandarin Chinese consonants sound very similar, such as z/c/s and zh/ch/sh. Audio samples will provide the best opportunity to learn the difference between them.

X: somewhere between the **sh** in **sh**eep and **s** in **s**ilk

Q: a very aspirated **ch** as in **ch**arm

C: **ts** as in pan**ts**

Z: **z** as in **z**oom

S: **s** as in **s**ilk

CH: **ch** as in **ch**arm

ZH: **dg** as in do**dg**e

SH: **sh** as in **sh**ave

G: hard **g** as in **g**raphic

GENERAL VOWELS

The pronunciation of a vowel may depend on its preceding consonant. For example, the “i” in “shi” is distinct from the “i” in “di.” Vowel pronunciation may also change depending on where the vowel appears in a word, for example the “i” in “shi” versus the “i” in “ting.” Finally, compound vowels are often—though not always—pronounced as conjoined but separate vowels. You’ll find a few of the trickier compounds below.

IU: as in **ewe**

IE: **ye** as in **ye**s

UO: **war** as in **war**m

APPENDIX

Glossary

Glossary

While not required reading, this glossary is intended to offer further context for the many concepts and terms utilized throughout this novel as well as provide a starting point for learning more about the rich culture from which these stories were written.

GENRES

Danmei

Danmei (耽美 / "indulgence in beauty") is a Chinese fiction genre focused on romanticized tales of love and attraction between men. It is analogous to the BL (boys' love) genre in Japanese media and is better understood as a genre of plot than a genre of setting. For example, though many danmei novels feature wuxia or xianxia settings, others are better understood as tales of sci-fi, fantasy, or horror.

Wuxia

Wuxia (武侠 / "martial heroes") is one of the oldest Chinese literary genres and consists of tales of noble heroes fighting evil and injustice. It often follows martial artists, monks, or rogues who live apart from the ruling government, which is often seen as useless or corrupt. These societal outcasts—both voluntary and otherwise—settle disputes among themselves, adhering to their own moral codes over the law.

Characters in wuxia focus primarily on human concerns, such as political strife between factions and advancing their own personal sense of justice. True wuxia is low on magical or supernatural elements. To Western moviegoers, a well-known example is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*.

Xianxia

Xianxia (仙侠 / "immortal heroes") is a genre related to wuxia that places more emphasis on the supernatural. Its characters often strive to

become stronger, with the end goal of extending their lifespan or achieving immortality.

Xianxia heavily features Daoist themes, while cultivation and the pursuit of immortality are both genre requirements. If these are not the story's central focus, it is not xianxia. *Husky* is considered part of both the danmei and xianxia genres.

Terminology

Barriers: A type of magical shield. In *Husky*, a barrier separates the mortal realm and the ghost realm, and Chu Wanning is noted to be especially skilled in creating barriers.

Classical Chinese Chess (weiqi): Weiqi is the oldest known board game in human history. The board consists of a many-lined grid upon which opponents play unmarked black and white stones as game pieces to claim territory.

Colors:

White: Death, mourning, purity. Used in funerals for both deceased and the mourners.

Red: Happiness, good luck. Used for weddings.

Purple: Divinity and immortality; often associated with nobility, homosexuality (in the modern context), and demonkind (in the xianxia genre).

Courtesy Names: A courtesy name is given to an individual when they come of age. (*See Name Guide for more information*.)

Cultivation/cultivators: Cultivators are practitioners of spirituality and the martial arts. They seek to gain understanding of the will of the universe while also increasing personal strength and extending their lifespan.

Cut-sleeve: A term for a gay man. Comes from a tale about an emperor's love for, and relationship with, a male politician. The emperor was called to the morning assembly, but his lover was asleep on his robe. Rather than wake him, the emperor cut off his own sleeve.

Dragons: Great beasts who wield power over the weather. Chinese dragons differ from their Western counterparts as they are often benevolent, bestowing blessings and granting luck. They are associated with the Heavens, the Emperor, and yang energy.

Dual Cultivation: A cultivation technique involving sex between participants that is meant to improve cultivation prowess. Can also be used as a simple euphemism for sex.

Eyes: Descriptions like "phoenix eyes" or "peach-blossom eyes" refer to eye shape. Phoenix eyes have an upturned sweep at their far corners, whereas peach-blossom eyes have a rounded upper lid and are often considered particularly alluring.

Face: *Mianzi* (面子), generally translated as "face," is an important concept in Chinese society. It is a metaphor for a person's reputation and can be extended to further descriptive metaphors. For example, "having face" refers to having a good reputation and "losing face" refers to having one's reputation hurt. Meanwhile, "giving face" means deferring to someone else to help improve their reputation, while "not wanting face" implies that a person is acting so poorly/shamelessly that they clearly don't care about their reputation at all. "Thin face" refers to someone easily embarrassed or prone to offense at perceived slights. Conversely, "thick face" refers to someone not easily embarrassed and immune to insults.

Fae: Fae (妖 / yao), refers to natural creatures such as animals, plants, or even inanimate objects, who over time absorb spiritual energy and gain spiritual awareness to cultivate a human form. They are sometimes referred to as "demons" or "monsters," though they are not inherently evil. In *Husky*, faewolves (妖狼) are a rare and expensive breed of wolf. Similarly, the feathered tribe are beings who are half-immortal (仙) and half-fae.

The Five Elements: Also known as the *wuxing* (五行 / "Five Phases") in Chinese philosophy: fire, water, wood, metal, earth. Each element corresponds to a planet: Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn, respectively. In *Husky*, cultivators' spiritual cores correspond with one or two elements; for example, Chu Wanning's elements are metal and wood.

Fire (火 / huo)

Water (水 / shui)

Wood (木 / mu)

Metal (金 / jin)

Earth (土 / tu)

Haitang: The *haitang* tree (海棠花), also known as crab apple or Chinese flowering apple, is endemic to China. The recurring motif for Chu Wanning is specifically the *xifu haitang* variety. In flower language, haitang symbolizes unrequited love.

Inedia: A common ability that allows an immortal to survive without mortal food or sleep by sustaining themselves on purer forms of energy based on Daoist fasting. Depending on the setting, immortals who have achieved inedia may be unable to tolerate mortal food, or they may be able to choose to eat when desired. The cultivation taught by Sisheng Peak notably does not rely on this practice.

Jade: Jade is a culturally and spiritually important mineral in China. Its durability, beauty, and the ease with which it can be utilized for crafting decorative and functional pieces alike has made it widely beloved since ancient times. The word might evoke green jade (the mineral jadeite), but Chinese texts are often referring to white jade (the mineral nephrite), as when a person's skin is described as "the color of jade."

Jianghu: A staple of wuxia, the jianghu (江湖 / "rivers and lakes") describes an underground society of martial artists, monks, rogues, artisans, and merchants who settle disputes between themselves per their own moral codes.

Lotus: This flower symbolizes purity of the heart and mind, as lotuses rise untainted from the muddy waters they grow in. It also signifies the holy seat of the Buddha.

Measurements: The "miles" and "inches" in *Husky* refer not to imperial measurement units, but to the Chinese measurement units, which have varied over time. In modern times, one Chinese mile (里 / *li*) is approximately a half-kilometer, one Chinese foot (尺 / *cun*) is approximately one-third of a meter, and one Chinese inch (寸 / *chi*) is one tenth of a Chinese foot.

Meridians: The means by which qi travels through the body, like a magical bloodstream. Medical and combat techniques that focus on redirecting, manipulating, or halting qi circulation focus on targeting the meridians at specific points on the body, known as acupoints. Techniques that can manipulate or block qi prevent a cultivator from using magical techniques until the qi block is lifted.

Moe: A Japanese term referring to cuteness or vulnerability in a character that evokes a protective feeling from the reader. Originally applied largely to female characters, the term has since seen expanded use.

Mythical Figures: Several entities from Chinese mythology make an appearance in the world of *Husky*, including:

Azure Dragon: The Azure Dragon (苍龙 / canglong, or 青龙 / qinglong) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing

the cardinal direction East, the element of wood, and the season of spring.

Ebon Tortoise: The Ebon Tortoise (玄武 / xuanwu) is one of four major creatures in Chinese astronomy, representing the cardinal direction North, the element of water, and the season of winter. It is usually depicted as a tortoise entwined with a serpent.

Flame Emperor: A mythological figure said to have ruled over China in ancient times. His name is attributed to his invention of slash-and-burn agriculture. There is some debate over whether the Flame Emperor is the same being as Shennong, the inventor of agriculture, or a descendant.

Fuxi: Emperor of the heavens, sometimes directly called Heavenly Emperor Fuxi. A figure associated with Chinese creation mythology.

Jiao dragon: A type of dragon in Chinese mythology, often said to be aquatic or river-dwelling, and able to control rain and floods.

Nüwa: A goddess in Chinese mythology, said to have been the one who created humanity by shaping the first humans out of clay. A prominent figure in Chinese mythology, even outside creation myths.

Phoenix: Fenghuang (凤凰 / "phoenix"), a legendary bird said to only appear in times of peace and to flee when a ruler is corrupt. They are heavily associated with femininity, the empress, and happy marriages.

Shennong: The deity and mythological ruler said to have taught agriculture and herbal medicine to the ancient Chinese people.

Vermilion Bird: The Vermilion Bird (朱雀上神) is one of four mythical beasts in Chinese constellations, representing the cardinal direction South, the element of fire, and the season of summer.

Yanluo: King of hell or the supreme judge of the underworld. His role in the underworld is to pass judgment on the dead, sending souls on to their next life depending on the karma they accrued from their last one.

Paper Money: Imitation money made from decorated sheets of paper burned as a traditional offering to the dead.

Pills and Elixirs: Magic medicines that can heal wounds, improve cultivation, extend life, etc. In Chinese culture, these medicines are usually delivered in pill form, and the pills are created in special kilns.

Pleasure House: Courtesans at these establishments provided entertainment of many types, ranging from song and dance to more intimate pleasures.

Qi: *Qi* (气) is the energy in all living things. There is both righteous qi and evil or poisonous qi.

Cultivators strive to cultivate qi by absorbing it from the natural world and refining it within themselves to improve their cultivation base. A cultivation base refers to the amount of qi a cultivator possesses or is able to possess. In xianxia, natural locations such as caves, mountains, or other secluded places with beautiful scenery are often rich in qi, and practicing there can allow a cultivator to make rapid progress in their cultivation.

Cultivators and other qi manipulators can utilize their life force in a variety of ways, including imbuing objects with it to transform them into lethal weapons or sending out blasts of energy to do damage. Cultivators also refine their senses beyond normal human levels. For instance, they may cast out their spiritual sense to gain total awareness of everything in a region around them or to sense potential danger.

Qi Circulation: The metabolic cycle of qi in the body, where it flows from the dantian to the meridians and back. This cycle purifies and refines qi, and good circulation is essential to cultivation. In xianxia, qi can be transferred from one person to another through physical contact, and it can heal someone who is wounded if the donor is trained in the art.

Qi Deviation: A qi deviation (走火入魔 / "to catch fire and enter demonhood") occurs when one's cultivation base becomes unstable. Common causes include an unstable emotional state and/or strong negative emotions, practicing cultivation methods incorrectly, reckless use of

forbidden or high-level arts, or succumbing to the influence of demons and evil spirits. When qi deviation arises from mental or emotional causes, the person is often said to have succumbed to their inner demons or "heart demons" (心魔).

Symptoms of qi deviation in fiction include panic, paranoia, sensory hallucinations, and death, whether by the qi deviation itself causing irreparable damage to the body or as a result of its symptoms—such as leaping to one's death to escape a hallucination. Common fictional treatments for qi deviation include relaxation (voluntary or forced by an external party), massage, meditation, or qi transfer from another individual.

Qiankun Pouch: (乾坤囊/ "universe pouch") A pouch containing an extradimensional space within it, capable of holding more than the physical exterior dimensions of the pouch would suggest.

Qinggong: Qinggong (轻功) is a cultivator's ability to move swiftly through the air as if on the wind.

Red Thread of Fate: The red thread imagery originates in legend and has become a Chinese symbol for fated love. An invisible red thread is said to be tied around the limb or finger of the two individuals destined to fall in love, forever linking them.

Reigning Years: Chinese emperors took to naming the eras of their reign for the purpose of tracking historical records. The names often reflected political agendas or the current reality of the socioeconomic landscape.

Shidi, Shixiong, Shizun, etc: Chinese titles and terms used to indicate a person's role or rank in relation to the speaker. Because of the robust nature of this naming system, and a lack of nuance in translating

many to English, the original titles have been maintained. *(See Name Guide for more information)*

Spiritual core: A spiritual core (灵丹/灵核) is the foundation of a cultivator's power. It is typically formed only after ten years of hard work and study.

Spiritual Root: In *Husky,* spiritual roots (灵根) are associated with a cultivator's innate talent and elemental affinities. Not every cultivator possesses spiritual roots.

Three Immortal Souls and Seven Corporeal Spirits: Hun (魂) and po (魄) are two types of souls in Chinese philosophy and religion. Hun are immortal souls which represent the spirit and intellect, and leave the body after death. Po are corporeal spirits or mortal forms which remain with the body of the deceased. Each soul governs different aspects of a person's being, ranging from consciousness and memory, to physical function and sensation. Different traditions claim there are different numbers of each, but three hun and seven po (三魂七魄) are common in Daoism.

The Three Realms: Traditionally, the universe is divided into three realms: the **heavenly realm**, the **mortal realm**, and the **ghost realm**. The heavenly realm refers to the heavens and realm of the gods, where gods reside and rule; the mortal realm refers to the human world; and the ghost realm refers to the realm of the dead.

Vinegar: To say someone is drinking vinegar or tasting vinegar means that they're having jealous or bitter feelings. Generally used for a love interest growing jealous while watching the main character receive the attention of a rival suitor.

Wheel of Reincarnation: In Buddhism, reincarnation is part of the soul's continuous cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, known as Samsara: one's karma accumulated through the course of their life determines their circumstances in the next life. The Wheel of Reincarnation (六道轮回), translated literally as "Six Realms of Reincarnation," which souls enter after death, is often represented as having six sections, or realms. Each one represents a different "realm," or state of being, a person may attain depending on their karma: the realm of gods, asura, humans, animals, ghosts, and demons.

Yin Energy and Yang Energy: Yin and yang is a concept in Chinese philosophy which describes the complementary interdependence of opposite/contrary forces. It can be applied to all forms of change and differences. Yang represents the sun, masculinity, and the living, while yin represents the shadows, femininity, and the dead, including spirits and ghosts. In fiction, imbalances between yin and yang energy may do serious harm to the body or act as the driving force for malevolent spirits seeking to replenish themselves of whichever energy they lack.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rou Bao Bu Chi Rou ("Meatbun Doesn't Eat Meat") was a disciple of Sisheng Peak under the Tanlang Elder and the official chronicler of daily life at Wushan Palace. Unable to deal with Hua Binan's wretched tyranny after Taxian-jun's suicide, Meatbun took Madam Wang's orange cat, Cai Bao ("Veggiebun"), and fled. Thereafter Meatbun traveled the world to see the sights, making ends meet by writing down all manner of secrets and little-known anecdotes of the cultivation world—which Meatbun had gathered during travel—and selling them on the street side.

NOTABLE WORKS:

"God-Knows-What Rankings"
Top of the Cultivation World Best-Sellers List for ten years straight.

"The Red Lotus Pavilion Decameron"
Banned by Sisheng Peak Sect Leader Xue and Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning; no longer available for sale.

"He Who Failed as a People's Teacher"
No longer available for sale due to complaints filed by Yuheng Elder Chu Wanning.

"Bridge Architect Hua Binan"
2019 winner of the Ghost Realm's Annual Fuxi-Roasting Writing Contest

"Twenty Years on the Forbes Cultivation World's Billionaires Ranking and Still Going Strong: A Biography of Jiang Xi"
Original title "The Care and Keeping of a Beauty with Empty Nest Syndrome: A Biography of Jiang Xi"; title changed due to unknown reasons.

"The Great and Admirable Sect Leader Xue Ziming"
Original title "This So-Called 'Straight Guy' Is Such a Snake"; title changed due to unknown reasons.

Dumb

"The Husky & His White Cat Shizun"
Also being sold in another world.

...and others to come. Please look forward to them.

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FROM THE *NEW YORK TIMES* BESTSELLING AUTHOR OF
THE HUSKY AND HIS WHITE CAT SHIZUN

ROU BAO BU CHI ROU

Wealthy and handsome, yet mentally unstable—He Yu has returned home from overseas with one goal in mind: to win the heart of Xie Xue, the girl of his dreams. However, in his time away, he has nursed more than unrequited feelings. He must confront his long-held grudge against Xie Xue's overprotective brother, Xie Qingcheng, who doesn't think He Yu capable of love.

But history is not easily rewritten. As He Yu's former doctor, Xie Qingcheng is the only person in the world who truly understands He Yu's volatile mental state. When the two are involved in an explosive incident that exposes a dark secret, Xie Qingcheng's suspicions about He Yu are confirmed. Now, He Yu must confront his own demons...including his dark obsession with Xie Qingcheng.

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Footnotes

Chapter 311: The Grand Finale

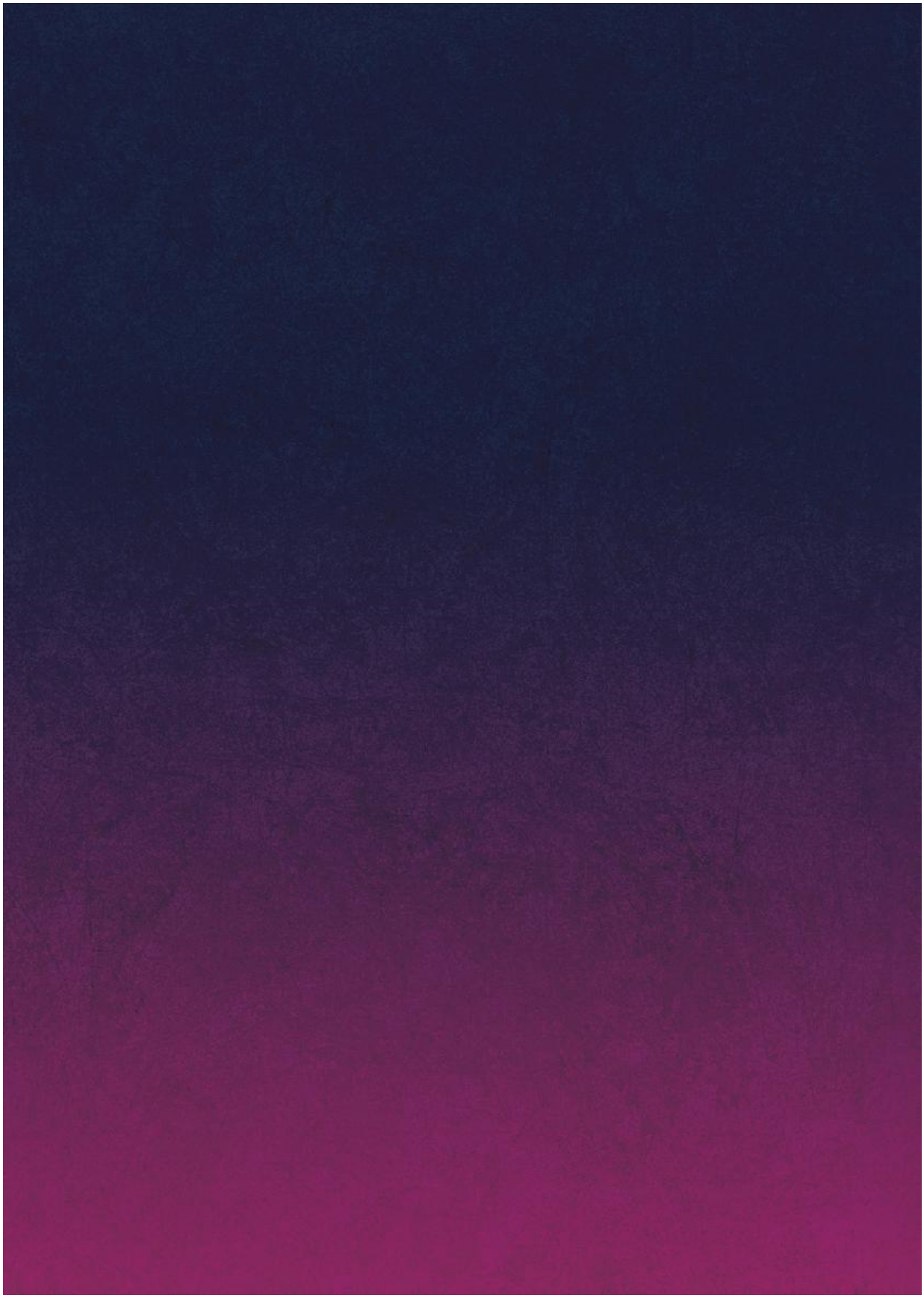
[1] Shizu, a term of address for the master of one's master. Shishu, a term of address for one's martial uncle.

Chapter 312: Returning to Live in the South

[2] Title from a collection of poems by Tao Yuanming (also known as Tao Qian), a poet from the Six Dynasties period best known for his reclusive lifestyle and pastoral poetry.

The Only Possibility: Chapter 3

[3] Xuezhang, a term of address for one's senior in school.



The Martyr's Path
After his failed attempt to kill Hua Binan, Chu Wanning remains at Wushan Palace, held captive once again by Taxian-jun. The opening of the Space-Time Gate of Life and Death has irrevocably changed and merged the two universes, plunging both realms into chaos. At last, Taxian-jun reveals the truth of Hua Binan's horrific plan: He intends to defy the gods and lead his persecuted people home to their ancestral lands in the demon realm, even if it means destroying both mortal worlds in the process.
While Xue Meng rallies the remaining forces of the cultivation realm to storm the Sisheng Peak of another world, Chu Wanning alone has the power to stand in Hua Binan's way. Yet after losing the man he loved in two lifetimes, does he still have the strength to oppose the one who ruined him?
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